

## Himalayan Balsam



If you walk around Rockland Broad in high summer you are likely to see a mass of very tall, leafy plants with large, pink flowers, which are shaped like an open trumpet dangling from a slender stem, enticing bees to enter inside to taste its sweet smelling nectar. This plant is the Himalayan Balsam, *Impatiens glandulifera*, also known as Policeman's Helmet. However, there is a problem with this seemingly innocent, attractive plant; as its name suggests its real home is in the Himalayas and not the Norfolk Broads. It was introduced into England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has since spread profusely, mainly along water ways and the banks of rivers and lakes. It is so successful it is beginning to crowd out the native plants and in some areas it is the only species to be seen along the river banks. Its method of seed dispersal is spectacular as it develops large seed capsules that will explode when touched, sending seeds flying in all directions.

The problem is that if left to itself it will replace all the native plants, and also, as it is shallow rooted it can also lead to bank erosion, as when it dies back in the winter, it leaves the soil bare and exposed. It is, however, a very rich source of nectar and is very attractive to bees so it can be seen as beneficial to some wildlife. The problem, though, is that it is so attractive to bees that they will prefer it to native plants, which then are less likely to be pollinated and these indigenous plants become threatened. This is then a problem to those insects who have evolved to feed only on our native plants, and as they disappear, biodiversity is threatened.

Apparently in the Himalayas the balsam is not so common, and does not grow so large, as it is controlled by native pests. In England there are no such natural controls so the Himalayan Balsam grows profusely and will become the dominant plant unless managed. There are trials being carried out to see if a rust fungus, from its native habitat, can control the plant, but this research will take many years and will need very careful trialling. In the meantime the only way to manage the Himalayan balsam is to pull it up, when the plant is large but before its seed pods have grown in July or August. It is not possible to eradicate the balsam, but with a team of dedicated volunteers it is possible to contain the plant and stop its spread along our native waterways. This will help protect our native plants, such as the endangered marsh sowthistle and hairy willowherb. Look out for notices about when you can help in trying to manage this invasive species later in the summer.

Peter Armitage on behalf of Rockland Broad Management Committee