

Balsam in the Tale Valley 2014



The Tale Valley Trust has been removing Himalayan balsam from the river corridor and adjacent feeder streams since 2005. Volunteers have always been forthcoming and with their help the 6 mile stretch has been covered initially in 2.5 days and in recent years in a single day.

In 2012 the TVT was awarded a 3 year grant by Defra's Local Action Group Biodiversity programme for non-native species. This has helped with tools, waders, newsletters & community awareness events, as well as funding professional control of Japanese knotweed in the valley. This in turn has brought recognition & appreciation from local parishes together with some funding from the parish councils.

In April a meeting was hosted by the Clinton Devon Estate in the lower Otter Valley bringing together a cross section of interested parties in the catchment. The TVT was cited as an example of 'best practice'. We attended the meeting to share information, encourage, & learn. We are very fortunate to have a volunteer who regularly posts updates on social media (Facebook & Twitter) as well as the TVT website with news & updates.

Recently posters erected by the Otter Valley Association (OVA) have appeared along the banks (footpaths), of the Otter inviting the Public to 'Bash the Balsam' & giving dates of organised sessions. This is all very positive.

So too was our first 2014 day in the river on June 25th. 8 volunteers working in pairs covered the 6 miles in 7.5 hours. For the first few miles less than 50 plants were found. By the time we reached Cadhay Bridge at the confluence we had collectively found no more than 300 plants. The worst patch was around Fairmile in the area of 'no man's land'.

The bonus on the other hand was finding a mink in our trap in the lower Tale. 'Our' water voles appear to be thriving.



Mink caught in a trap.



Volunteers covered 6 miles in 7.5 hours

With the same number of volunteers, though different faces, in July we concentrated on the side stream from Payhembury village to the river, & the small holdings adjacent to the river at Fairmile. These areas were much worse than we had realised which prevented us from completing our journey to the confluence. Subsequently we arranged a tractor & topper to pulverise a large section of the un-maintained paddock at Fairmile to facilitate volunteer access to balsam where bramble had previously prevented it.

In August we decided to forego the section from Danes Mill to Tuck Mill, concentrating instead on the Payhembury brook. It certainly needed our attention! Balsam on the main river from Tuck Mill to Fairmile wasn't too prevalent but there was certainly enough of it to warrant our efforts! Fairmile smallholdings again engaged all the volunteers for over an hour. Much of it was already seeding but we will focus on this area again in 2015. We were able to complete the last mile to Cadhay bridge, although here we found a double fenced side ditch (likely to be the boundary between Cadhay & Lord Colridge) which was stifled in balsam but also inaccessible to volunteers due to scrub overgrowth. We have never previously noticed balsam here.



Highlights for August were abundant Otter tracks & signs, kingfishers & dippers, fish-life in profusion, elephant hawkmoth caterpillars, hawthorn berries, blackberries & sloes.

Despite the abundant & varied fish life in the river, diffuse pollution continues to be an issue in the valley & the West Country Rivers Trust has estimated that to conduct in in depth investigation into the source(s) of these high nutrient levels will cost £5000-£7000.



The final day this year was in mid-September – experimental, as established plants previously missed would be in seed. Nevertheless there were plenty in flower - either because they were in shaded areas & were late developers, or they had been suppressed by dense vegetation such as nettle & bramble – or plants had been pulled previously but not severed at the root & despite most having been discarded on barren, dry ground some managed to re-shoot & flower! It was certainly worth a re-visit.



We started in Payhembury village, 2 volunteers exploring up hill to discover if there were plants growing above our usual start point – thankfully there were not! Down the ditch, & on down the main river there were more than enough plants – several were multi-headed where they had been grazed by stock & then recovered with a vengeance!

Kingfishers & dippers were thriving on the river, as was the fish life. I saw the largest brown trout I've seen for years in the Tale – 12" long & 1.5" deep, in a pool with smaller trout, on the Colesworthy Farm stretch. Again one of the worst bits was the area of domestic properties at Fairmile. Here we had to use a chain saw to reduce a fallen tree to allow access to the balsam, as well as 'topping' the paddock for the second time this summer to reduce the bramble scrub & interwoven balsam. Nevertheless we reached Cadhay bridge in good time & were able to repair an electric fence line cattle had trampled in the water meadow.

Considerable otter activity was observed in the fields downstream of the Rydon fish ladder. A watervole swam from one side of the river to the other in front of two volunteers, Andy & Mo.

And a new, invasive, non-indigenous species was observed swimming in the face of climate change sceptics.....

