

Ramblers Gems



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The Spreading Menace

While we were out on our evening walk last Tuesday, we went through the area known as the Bradshaw Valley Nature Reserve. A blight on this once picturesque area is the colonising effect of the invasive plant Himalayan Balsam.

This plant is taking over our rail and river banks, wastelands and woodlands alike and there seems to be no end in sight. The Himalayan Balsam was introduced to the British Isles in 1839 by Victorian plant hunters who were keen on its beautiful pink flowers and exploding seed pods. The plant has had plenty of time to establish in the UK and, over the last 50 years, has spread rapidly. But Himalayan Balsam is a challenging plant. It competes with our native plants for light, nutrients, pollinators and space, excluding other plants and reducing biodiversity. It dies back in the winter, leaving riverbanks bare and open to erosion. Dead leaves and plant debris from the weed block waterways and lead to flooding.

The traditional ways of controlling the plant, either by pulling it up or spraying it with chemicals, don't or can't always work, because the plant often grows in difficult to reach places and delicate river sites. It spreads very quickly. Like most non-native plant species, Himalayan Balsam arrived in the UK without any of the natural enemies that keep it in check in its native range.



Botanists have looked for natural enemies to control this plant and a highly selective rust fungus was found to damage Himalayan Balsam and no other native species. A strain of Indian rust fungus was approved for release back in 2015. Initially, the fungus was released at a number of trial sites in the UK and later, over the course of 2015-2019, at a total of 47 sites in 19 counties in England and Wales. For the rust fungus to become part of the local ecosystem and control Himalayan Balsam naturally, it needs to survive in the soil during our winters and infect new balsam seedlings in the spring. These trials continue.

Until this method is fully effective the only solution remaining is to pull it out by its roots and crush it.

Michael C

Wildflower Quiz – Spring and Summer – Can you name them? Barbara S

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8 Scented



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17 Unscented



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Elephants and the Cuckoo

While I was out pioneering the recent Hurst Green walk with Jane, we heard a cuckoo on Longridge Fell. While I was growing up in Darwen I was accustomed to hearing them each spring, but in recent times they have become less common, and it has been many years since I last heard one. So, I was pleased that I once again heard the distinctive voice of the Cuckoo.

I am sure you will have heard of the phrase “the butterfly effect.” This is usually accompanied by the statement “a butterfly flutters its wings in the Amazon and a hurricane takes place on the other side of the world.” It is quite obvious that the world is interconnected, and quite small incidents in one part can lead to events happening in other parts of the world.

Cuckoos only spend a small amount of time here in Britain laying their eggs in other birds’ nests and then flying back to Africa. The young are fed by their unwittingly foster parent bird, and once fledged will follow on later undertaking this epic journey on their own. The adults and young cuckoo both feed on grubs which themselves feed on the young shoots of plants. As all gardeners know some shrubs need pruning annually to encourage the shrub to produce new young green shoots.

In Africa, if an elephant finds a tasty shrub it will snap off the branches to eat. It is in fact pruning the shrub and the plant goes on to produce new young shoots which in turn attracts the grubs and that in turn attracts the cuckoo.

So, the decline in the population of elephants in Africa leads to a decline in cuckoos in Britain.



Tony C

Garstang Castle

On our recent circular Tea and Cake walk from Scorton via Garstang many people were amazed to discover that we were just a couple of fields away from Garstang Castle. Known as Greenhalgh Castle, the castle was built in the late fifteenth century on lands confiscated from a former supporter of Richard III.

Richard III, final Yorkist King of England, was defeated and killed at the Battle of Bosworth Field (1485) resulting in a regime change. Henry Tudor took the throne prompting hard-line Yorkists to flee abroad including one James Harrington, then owner of Greenhalgh Manor. After the Battle of Stokes Field (1487) the leader of the victorious army, Thomas Stanley, Earl of Derby, was rewarded with land from these dispossessed lords. The Earl was granted a licence to build a castle in 1490 and he commenced construction of Greenhalgh Castle soon after. The new castle was built on the site of a former manor house and its function was to administer the Earl's new estates in central Lancashire. It is unlikely it was ever intended as a Lordly residence.

The site occupied a knoll of high ground surrounded by marsh with a narrow causeway connecting it to firmer land, this made the site easily defensible. The castle occupied the entire space on the knoll and was built with a quadrangular curtain wall protected in each corner with square towers. The eastern turret incorporated the gatehouse. The confined space defined by the marsh meant that Greenhalgh Castle had no outer bailey.



During the Civil War (1642-1651) the castle was a key Royalist outpost in Lancashire. Its owner backed the wrong side and consequently the castle was subjected to a protracted siege after which it was destroyed to prevent any further military use. Many of the stone blocks are to be found within the nearby Greenhalgh Castle Farm and other buildings in the nearby vicinity.

Alan R

The Badger by John Clare

The badger grunting on his woodland track
With shaggy hide and sharp nose scrowed with black
Roots in the bushes and the woods, and makes
A great high burrow in the ferns and brakes.
With nose on ground he runs an awkward pace,
And anything will beat him in the race.
The shepherd's dog will run him to his den
Followed and hooted by the dogs and men.
The woodman when the hunting comes about
Goes round at night to stop the foxes out
And hurrying through the bushes to the chin
Breaks the old holes, and tumbles headlong in.

When midnight comes a host of dogs and men
Go out and track the badger to his den,
And put a sack within the hole, and lie
Till the old grunting badger passes bye.
He comes and hears—they let the strongest loose.
The old fox hears the noise and drops the goose.
The poacher shoots and hurries from the cry,
And the old hare half wounded buzzes bye.
They get a forked stick to bear him down
And clap the dogs and take him to the town,
And bait him all the day with many dogs,
And laugh and shout and fright the scampering hogs.
He runs along and bites at all he meets:
They shout and hollo down the noisy streets.

He turns about to face the loud uproar
And drives the rebels to their very door.
The frequent stone is hurled where e'er they go;
When badgers fight, then every one's a foe.
The dogs are clapt and urged to join the fray;
The badger turns and drives them all away.
Though scarcely half as big, demure and small,
He fights with dogs for bones and beats them all.
The heavy mastiff, savage in the fray,
Lies down and licks his feet and turns away.
The bulldog knows his match and waxes cold,
The badger grins and never leaves his hold.
He drives the crowd and follows at their heels
And bites them through—the drunkard swears and reels.



The frightened women take the boys away,
The blackguard laughs and hurries on the fray.
He tries to reach the woods, an awkward race,
But sticks and cudgels quickly stop the chase.
He turns again and drives the noisy crowd
And beats the many dogs in noises loud.
He drives away and beats them every one,
And then they loose them all and set them on.
He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men,
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd again;
Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies
And leaves his hold and cackles, groans, and dies.

Some keep a baited badger tame as hog
And tame him till he follows like the dog.
They urge him on like dogs and show fair play.
He beats and scarcely wounded goes away.
Lapt up as if asleep, he scorns to fly
And seizes any dog that ventures nigh.
Clapt like a dog, he never bites the men
But worries dogs and hurries to his den.
They let him out and turn a harrow down
And there he fights the host of all the town.
He licks the patting hand, and tries to play
And never tries to bite or run away,
And runs away from the noise in hollow trees
Burnt by the boys to get a swarm of bees.



Pesto Cenorr

The Sense of Sound: Rivers

This is the third in my series of articles based on walks undertaken by Spring Vale Rambling Class embracing the sense of sound. I have used a typical evening walk undertaken in the past starting from Marles Wood near Ribchester in the Ribble Valley. This area in the old syllabus is probably better remembered as Sales Wheel Woods.

From the car park the path follows the River Ribble and heads in a north eastern direction towards Dinkley Footbridge with its many convenient places and observe wildlife, flowers, birds and the fish rising in the river to catch their supper. You need to be very alert to spot the ever widening circles of ripples made by the fish as the clue to their hunting for the unsuspecting flies.

Dipper

This little chap is so easy to miss as you may be confused when you see him. He is recognised as an anomaly amongst our small songbirds. Mistaken to be an overfed Wren or perhaps a strangely coloured Robin or even a suicidal Sparrow as it is seen quietly swooping from mossy stones that are uncovered at this time of year, into the river. With the abundance of the Cadis Fly, their favourite food, they dip into the water to have their fill, fly back out to sit on a stone to shake their feathers before repeating this again and again. He madly bobs from boulder to stone, all the time reciting his crystal-clear song that he learnt from the river. His sweet, rippling warble, usually heard between October and July is difficult to pick out from the sounds of the river itself.



Kingfisher

As you emerge out from the woodland everyone immediately starts to look for that most magical of birds the Kingfisher. His silhouette is so inspiring that you can't believe that he is even from this world with a cloak of incandescent blue and a chest more orange than any Christmas satsuma, but this is not the case.

This king of all fishing birds opens his beak to reveal a taut, high pitched whistle of a sound. Although disappointed with his call you can still feel happy to have spent time with this most brilliant of all British Birds. All that he will reveal to us will be a quick glance of blue as he dashes off to blow the mind of the next unsuspecting walker.



Heron

This last bird is a very magical friend to spot on our journey. Although Herons enjoy the togetherness of the nesting colonies usually high in the trees on the banks of a river, they spend a lot of time by themselves usually keeping silent when feeding but woe betide anyone or thing that encroaches onto their territories! That's when you hear a series of loud clucking go-go-go's which can build up to a rapid, frank squawk lasting up to 20 seconds! These birds are the omnivores of the bird world with a diet of aquatic prey such as fish, frogs, reptiles, chicks from nearby ducks and moorhens, rodents, crustaceans such as crabs as well as aquatic insects. They stand motionless on the edge of the river or just in the shallow water waiting silently for their prey to come within range. Repeating this action from an upright position gives them a wider field of view but is mesmerising for the observer. Almost hypnotic as they move their long neck from side to side before spearing his prey.



But the symbolism of the Heron referring to this same stillness and tranquility, as human beings it reminds us that just as the Heron wades through marshes and the water's edge, we move through on life's journey, but we must never give up.

Maggie A