

Rhododendron ponticum Control and its potential adverse effect on the Badger *Meles meles*

R. ponticum is a priority non-native invasive species for control and, in certain areas eradication. It suppresses indigenous flora and is host to two fungal pathogens - *Phytophthora ramorum* and *Phytophthora kernoviae*. These can attack and kill beech trees and ivy as well as *R. ponticum*.

Since the Victorian era, *R. ponticum* has spread, enveloping, amongst other things, setts (shelter sites) of badgers. Badgers are protected by the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 as amended by the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Acts 2004 and 2007. They are also listed in Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Badger setts have benefitted from this insidious cover which creates a dilemma because *R. ponticum* needs to be controlled.

In order to comply with legislation it is important for companies and individuals to understand the implications of disturbing protected species. To undertake certain work a licence may be required. Prior to starting *R. ponticum* control it is important to check each stand for signs of activity which might provide evidence, that a protected species has a shelter site under the canopy. The active presence of badgers may be indicated by signs of foraging (snuffle holes), worn paths (occasionally with pad marks) and balls of bedding together with faeces and urine deposited in shallow pits close by. These indicators may lead to holes dug in substrata or to cavities under rocks. If a shelter site is identified, then a competent specialist should be involved in order to authenticate the species and advise what action should be taken, bearing in mind that otters *Lutra lutra* or pine martens *Martes martes* may also be found in similar situations.

Once the exact species is known, a strategy for rhododendron control needs to be implemented, whilst leaving intact those plants that are directly associated with a sett. Setts can be extensive; therefore all holes and pathways should be recorded to indicate the extent of the treatment required.

In order to minimise disturbance a herbicide injection method is recommended. This entails (a) drilling holes Ø1cm into the stem to a depth of about two centimetres and (b) injecting into them a 50% solution of the herbicide Glyphosate, commonly known as "Roundup", if carried out properly, this treatment will kill bushes within six to nine months. Since there is no chemical drift to affect other plants or watercourses the environmental hazard of spraying herbicides is minimised, and treated bushes – cover for resident animals – remain intact. Subsequently appropriate local provenance vegetation could be planted to replace the dead or dying rhododendron, maintaining cover at the sett. Planting in and around the area of the sett will require to be under supervision to maintain the integrity of tunnels and chambers. Identified pathways to and from a shelter site should remain open after removal of bushes beyond the shelter site. The Lever and Mulch (L&M) technique related to *R. ponticum* removal is recommended for the remainder of the site to be cleared beyond the designated sett area. This has many benefits, (see Skye and Lochalsh Environment Forum Power-point presentation at www.slef.org.uk or www.leverandmulch.co.uk), not the least of which is the minimal use of chemicals where a protected species shelter site is found and none used beyond the localised control around the shelter site.

Badgers have a complex breeding cycle including the phenomenon of delayed implantation. This enables them to mate in any month albeit usually in spring with a later mating in autumn and yet produce their young in early spring of the following year. Cubs are generally born in February or March and remain dependent until late June; subsequently they may remain within the group or clan. As a consequence work around the sett area should only be undertaken under licence from 1st July to 30th November inclusive.

Roger Cottis
Tawny Croft Wildlife Consultants
Isleornsay
Sleat
Isle of Skye, IV43 8QS.

T: 01471 833 325
E: cottiskye@btinternet.com