

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

Rhododendron ponticum (*R.p*) 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 *P. kernoviae*. The former can attack and kill oak, beech, *Viburnum* species and ivy, and the latter has been found to infect bilberry *Vaccinium myrtles*. Both organisms infect and are harboured by *R. ponticum*, a significant vector of these diseases.

Since its introduction to cultivation in the eighteenth century, *R.p* 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 Wildlife & Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011. 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 at sites where *R.p* 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.p* control it is important to check each stand for signs of activity which might provide evidence that a protected species occupies 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, this is a case for which a herbicide injection method can be recommended. This entails (a) drilling holes Ø1,6cm into each stem to a depth of about two centimetres and (b) injecting into them a 20% solution of the herbicide Glyphosate, commonly known as "Roundup". If carried out properly, this treatment will kill bushes within six to nine months, but every stem must be treated. Since there is no chemical drift to affect other plants or watercourses the environmental hazard of spraying herbicides is minimised, and, importantly, 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 supervision to ensure that the integrity of tunnels and chambers is maintained. 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 PowerPoint presentation available for downloading at www.slef.org.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 that includes the phenomenon of delayed implantation. This enables them to mate in any month, albeit usually in spring with a later rut in autumn, and yet they 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 from 1st July to 30th November inclusive.

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