
Ragwort – *friend or foe?*

EMBARGOED for Thursday 19 June 2008

What's new?

On Thursday 19th June, three organisations, The British Horse Society (BHS), Plantlife and Butterfly Conservation will join forces to launch a new guidance leaflet on Common Ragwort - a cheerful yellow plant found across Scotland - which aims to build a consensus around the management of this contentious flower.

What's the problem?

Common Ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* is a native plant with yellow, daisy-like flowers. It is a natural part of grassland habitats and supports many species of wildlife, including fungi and insects, which depend on it for their survival. However, Ragwort is toxic to grazing animals, particularly horses, and can result in irreversible liver damage. There is no evidence that Ragwort is increasing but in an attempt to target the effective removal of plants from grazing land and to increase public awareness of its many benefits to biodiversity, a detailed guidance leaflet has been published and is widely available through the offices of SNH and through the offices and websites of BHS Scotland, Plantlife Scotland and Butterfly Conservation Scotland.

Helene Mauchlen, for British Horse Society Scotland said:

“We accept that when ragwort grows as part of a diverse plant community away from grazing land it has a place in the countryside. But all land managers must ensure that ragwort is controlled in and around grazing land or land used for forage production. And horse owners in particular have a duty to ensure that equines do not come into contact with this plant, which is so poisonous to horses and ponies.

Paul Kirkland, Director of Butterfly Conservation Scotland said:

“We appreciate the devastating effect this plant can have on horses, but in some places, this plant is the only good nectar source for beneficial insects. The declining Cinnabar Moth is totally dependent on ragwort”.

Dr Deborah Long, Conservation Officer for Plantlife Scotland said:

“It is of course sensible to remove ragwort from grazing land but in other habitats it should be recognised as a valuable native plant which has a rightful place in our landscape. We would encourage landowners to take the time to identify Ragwort correctly as there have been unfortunate cases where other wild flowers, such as St John's Wort and Tansy, have been destroyed needlessly as part of ragwort removal programmes”.

Today also saw the release by Scottish Government of new Guidance entitled “How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort, copies of which are available from Animal Welfare, Pentland House, 47 Robbs Loan, Edinburgh EH14 1TY

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Images

We request that if using any of the images supplied, a picture credit is provided for the relevant photographer. Images should only be used in conjunction with this press release.

Leaflet cover (pdf)

Ragwort (photographer Paul Kirkland/Butterfly Conservation)

Cinnabar Moth adult (photographer Mark Parsons /Butterfly Conservation)

Cinnabar Moth caterpillars (photographer Stan Phillips /Butterfly Conservation)

Photo opportunity

There will be a photo opportunity with representatives from the British Horse Society, Butterfly Conservation, Plantlife and Michael Russell, Minister for the Environment, at the Scottish Government Pavilion, Avenue J, Stand 135, The Royal Highland Show from 1200. Please contact the Scottish Government Press Office for more details. Contact telephone: Elaine Mitchell – Tel No: 0131 2442560 or 07881500657.

Notes for editors

1. Common Ragwort (*Senecio jacobea*) is extremely poisonous to horses, livestock and humans. It is particularly dangerous to horses in hay. On the other hand it is a native plant, and a valuable source of nectar for butterflies, moths and hoverflies. It is also the sole food plant of the Cinnabar Moth, listed on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan as rapidly declining.
2. Eradication efforts using herbicide have sometimes targeted the wrong plants. Sometimes rare plants have been destroyed accidentally. The leaflet illustrates some of the more common similar-looking plants.
3. The leaflet was produced by the British Horse Society Scotland, Plantlife Scotland and Butterfly Conservation Scotland, with funding from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). It will be available from the offices and websites of BHS Scotland, Plantlife Scotland and Butterfly Conservation Scotland and from SNH offices.
4. The British Horse Society is the UK's largest equine charity, which has the welfare of horses and ponies at its heart. In Scotland BHS continues to campaign for ragwort control and to educate horse owners on the dangers of ragwort.

5. Plantlife is the UK's leading conservation charity working to save wild plants and flowers, both nationally and internationally. We have offices in England, Scotland and Wales and HRH the Prince of Wales is our Patron.
6. Butterfly Conservation is the UK charity taking action to save butterflies and moths and their habitats. Butterfly Conservation staff and volunteers manage habitats to ensure their survival, with particular attention being given to threatened species. Butterfly Conservation has 12,500 members (over 600 in Scotland) and is the largest organisation of its kind in Europe. Butterfly Conservation Scotland receives funding from Scottish Natural Heritage and others to support the volunteers who collect butterfly and moth data.