

## ***Balsam on the Tale 2022***

**June 24** – 3 volunteers covered from Tuck Mill to Cadhay Bridge. Disappointingly the stretch through Escot Park had proliferated, although less than 10 plants overall were in flower. Looking back, on last year's August session we found many plants already seeding and popping as we pulled them up. 3 others covered the church etc.

Red admiral caterpillars were in healthy abundance feeding on nettles

I saw a kingfisher, 2 dippers and a tree creeper, and found a kingfisher egg in the river.

Beaver and otter activity throughout the stretch.

**July 21<sup>st</sup>** – Two days after the hottest day ever recorded in the UK, at 40.3C, (Coningsby, Lincolnshire), the Tale Valley had dropped back to around 20C. 5 seasoned river walkers were on hand, including 2 from the Westcountry Rivers Trust. A team started in Escot Park with 2 hours of tree coppicing on the riverbank, with the aid of a tractor – predominantly alder and willow. That complete, they headed downstream to Cadhay Bridge. Yog & Wendy were dropped at Danes Mill. Almost immediately they briefly saw a beaver as it slapped its tail on the water and disappeared. The pond on the edge of the river a few hundred meters downstream was balsam infested and took a while for the two of them to clear. Actually the river corridor itself was surprisingly clear between Danes & Tuck mills with long stretches completely balsam free.

Between Tuck Mill and Talewater wasn't too bad either, enabling three of us to cover from Danes to Talewater in 4 hours. 50% of the plants we pulled were in flower but none were yet holding viable seed.

The water level was very low – predictable with the lack of rain for many weeks. But the river Tale has many natural pools, and now of course several summer beaver dams holding back the flow and providing refuge for brown trout and smaller fish species, and a larder for the healthy population of otters and kingfishers. Dippers were finding easy pickings of insect larvae under pebbles in the shallower stretches. Damsel flies and meadow brown butterflies were abundant. Dragonflies, and other butterflies such as gate keeper, holly blue, clouded yellow, small & large whites, comma, red admiral, peacock and ringlet were all present but in disappointingly low numbers. Paradoxically the derelict buildings and industrial wasteland at Talewater is a haven for insect life, and indeed balsam, growing in profusion and undisturbed. The Escot stretch offered up a pair of iridescent (water) mint leaf beetles *Chrysolina herbacea*.



**Aug 25<sup>th</sup>** - England has had its joint hottest summer in a series which runs from 1884, according to the Met Office. Four of the top five have occurred since 2003.

The water levels in the Tale have held up remarkably well. Whether this has anything to do with the 13+ beaver dams we counted downstream of Danes Mill is open to debate. The river has plenty of deep pools along its length where brown trout up to 14 inches have been seen. Signs of otters remain plentiful and at least two kingfishers were seen today. Having struggled with low numbers of volunteers in the previous two months, this time we were 20! Simpkins Edwards chartered accountants once again came to our aid with eleven very keen and able helpers. Devon Wildlife Trust too were in force with three (nearly four, but for a last-minute beaver press call!). Six dedicated local residents completed the team. Between us we were able to complete the seven mile stretch in 4.5 hours *and* do some overhanging obstruction clearance between Escot and Cadhay. In addition, two sensitive sections of water meadow ditch were cleared of silt and vegetation by hand. A very productive day! In general, the further downstream we came the more balsam there was, although the Payhembury brook and the pond downstream of Danes Mill were heavily infested. Conversely from that pond down to Tuck Mill (about a mile), there were barely 25 plants. Frequency was steady from Tuck Mill to the confluence – enough to keep volunteers on their toes!

A Huge thank you to all those involved this year, and to our Parish Council sponsors, & Mo & Andy Mills who have hung up their waders for the last time, after more than ten years volunteering in the Tale. A real community effort!

