

Upper Onny Invasive Plants Project

2025

A report of the control and survey of the West Onny
River for Himalayan balsam



Rob Rowe



Funded by STWA Boost for biodiversity and aided by Severn Rivers Trust and administered by Natural England

Thanks to all the volunteers involved including:

Viv Murphy, Sophie Bloor, Mollie Hooper, Jess Roberts and Naomi Wallis.
Simon Cooter from the Stiperstones NNR.
Plowden Estate.
Linley Estate.

UPPER ONNY INVASIVE PLANTS PROJECT REPORT 2025

Introduction.

This was the 11th year of this project continuing to try to eradicate the stands of invasive Himalayan Balsam along the upper reaches of the Onny River, in particular the West Onny. This year we did not know if there was any funding available, however Rob Rowe carried out survey and control over most of the project area along with landowner support. Funding has now been received for this and the next 4 years from Severn Trent Water Ltd.

The ten years of work was originally funded through grants from the Shropshire Hills AONB and the Upper Onny Wildlife group. Severn Trent Water Authority 'Boost for Biodiversity' fund financed the project in 2019 and 2020, by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust in 2021, the Stepping Stones project as part of the Green Recovery Fund in 2022, Severn Rivers Trust in 2024 and by the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation fund in 2023.

Aims of the project

The aims of the project were:

- To continue the balsam control on the River Onny catchment with the aim to eliminate this invasive species from the headwater catchment from source to the confluence of the East and West Onny and encourage the extension of its control further downstream.
- To survey the extent of balsam in the River Onny headwaters to prioritise effort and to monitor the effectiveness of control.

Requirement for the project

Headwaters can be considered the essential ecological foundation for healthy functioning river systems. These headwater streams are crucial in controlling water supply (both quality and quantity) to rivers downstream and are particularly important in flood risk management as the 'gathering grounds' for flood flows. The condition and management of headwaters can therefore impact upon the biodiversity and ecosystem services provided by associated river and wetland habitats, and vice versa, highlighting the need to consider the functional connectivity (existing and future) between habitats when planning catchment restoration.

Himalayan balsam is an invasive species that can impact upon native flora, sedimentation and erosion of rivers. Unlike many watercourses in England today the Upper Onnys (East and West) are relatively free of invasive plant species. Himalayan balsam is present in various parts of the catchment but its spread has been curtailed by the project, now in its eighth year. Without control it is likely to spread at a rapid rate, as it has done in the Clun catchment. The Clun catchment is now so infested that the Environment Agency has estimated that to control Himalayan balsam would cost over £100,000. Only by continued effort can the catchment be maintained clear of this invasive plant.



Invasive non-native species are now widely recognised as the second biggest threat to biodiversity worldwide. Japanese knotweed can block footpaths and damage concrete, tarmac, flood defences and the stability of river banks. Himalayan balsam suppresses native flora through shading which can reduce the range of riverside plants and threatens some of the important upland flush and mire sites in the catchment. This shading can also reduce the regeneration of important bank stabilising plants such as alders, leading to increased sediment loads in the river which can impact species downstream and damage gravel beds that are good spawning grounds for fish.

Project requirements

The project employs a project coordinators to manage volunteers to:

- Control Himalayan balsam on the Upper Onny River to maintain past management of this invasive species, focusing on areas identified in the last survey.
- To survey the extent of balsam on the river to ensure that future work is targeted and effective.



The coordinator surveys and controls Himalayan balsam through hand pulling in cooperation with landowners, using small teams of volunteers coordinated by the coordinator but with the support of local conservation bodies, landowners and fishing clubs. This is carried out between July and August before the plant set seed.

Coverage in 2025

In 2025 only about 60% of the river length was cleared compared to some previous years. This was due to lack of known funding and the work was almost all carried out by volunteers. The length not cleared, particularly through Linley estate, was known to be the area least effected in the past.

Himalayan balsam was managed by pulling by hand on 4 stretches of the Onny totalling 10 kilometres.

Length 1 started at SO 3189 9782 near White Grit and finished at SO 3242 9558 just before the Welsh lodge on the A488 and was 3 kilometres in length. This length is fairly clear of HB now but there are a few stubborn patches of hard to reach plants.

Length 2 started at SO 3460 9091 by the road bridge at Newton farm and finished at SO 3776 8958 the confluence with Crifton Brook and was just over 4 kilometres. The upper reach of this starts fairly clear but becomes very dense around the confluence with Crifton Brook.

Length 3 started at SO 3807 8856 [Myndmill bridge on the A489 and finished at SO 3797 8772 [at Choulton bridge] and was just over 1.1 kilometre. HB has become very dense along some of this area.

Length 4 started at SO 3847 8728 and finished at SO 3939 8747 opposite Hillend cottage and was 1.6 kilometre in length. HB has become very dense along some of this area and in the past has been tackled with large groups of volunteers

Recruiting volunteers

A small number of practised volunteers is more practical in most cases, with an ability to pick out balsam when not in flower, which was essential. Due to the efforts of this project there is considerably less balsam in the upper reaches than in the past. This allows work to be completed using one or two volunteers.

About 30 + person days were done by volunteers including some from Plowden fishing club and some organised by Severn Rivers Trust.

Notes from this season

Plowden Estate

Over the past decade there has been a notable change in the amount of HB on the Plowden stretch of the River Onny. The upper reaches have come frustratingly close to complete eradication without actually managing it. This is often due to small very hard to reach areas.



Also change in management along the river in some areas has had a detrimental effect of the amount of HB due to:

1. Lack of or little grazing in areas which were constantly grazed before has allowed HB to encroach where it wasn't before.
2. landowners going into schemes where they have fenced off areas of the river.

Both of these management types are beneficial in many ways but unfortunately allows HB to proliferate.

It should be noted that The Upper Onny wildlife group area only extends as far as Choulton bridge.

FUTURE ACTION

In October 2025 we received an offer to fund the project for five years including the present year. This has come from STWA Boost for Biodiversity who funded it in 2023. This should make it easier to plan going forward over the next 4 years . Severn Rivers Trust have indicated that they will help with this.

With this assured funding from STWA the next 12 months should see the HB controlled along the whole stretch from near the source of the West Onny between SO 3189 9782 and part way through Plowden estate to SO 3939 8747 which had happened in the previous decade. Also part of the Crifton brook and an outlying patch at the Bog will be hopefully be cleared.

The provision of a known annual grant for the next ongoing 4 years will make it much easier to plan and carry out removal of HB more thoroughly.

Doing some work to clear patches of scrub where the balsam is inaccessible and the river not too high in the winter months would also be a good idea. Possibly this work could be undertaken by the Stepping Stones project in future or built into FiPL and SRT projects.

Allocating stretches of river to volunteers could be a way forward in reducing the costs of the project and increasing its area of coverage.

Maps

- 1-9 Detailed maps of Himalayan balsam coverage
- 10 Full survey coverage map 2022

















