

NATIONAL CAPITAL

Hummingbirds succumb to vegetative “Velcro®”

Last September, birders at Rock Creek Park (Washington, D.C.) discovered four ruby-throated hummingbirds ensnared in the Velcro®-like seed heads (photo) of common burdock (*Arctium minus*), a nonnative weed that had invaded a natural area near the park maintenance yard. Three of the hummingbirds were dead, but

the group was able to free one that was still alive. Resource managers removed the 50-60 burdock plants, which can grow over 6 feet in height, and plan to control the species in the future.

The occurrence came as a surprise to park staff and even an expert on burdock, leading to an investigation into the nature of the phenomenon. Could a loggerhead shrike have been the cause? Although the shrike is well known for impaling its prey on sharp objects such as thorns, the hummingbirds were not impaled; the recurved barbs of the seed head would have made this impossible. More importantly, the shrike is rare in this part of the country and at this time of year. A more likely scenario is that the tiny birds had been feeding at a nearby sunflower, lit on the burdock for a rest, and got entangled, sealing their fate.

An electronic note posted on the NPS Natural Resource Bulletin Board and a scientific literature search generated some answers. Other accounts of wildlife being caught and killed in burdock in North America are on record. According to Martin McNicholl, an ornithologist in British Columbia, this plant species has been reported to occasionally kill small birds and brown bats (*Science News* 154(16):244); indeed, a resource manager at Wind Cave National Park (South Dakota) reported the death of a little brown bat in burdock at the park more than 10 years ago. And the problem also occurs in Eurasia, the native home of burdock. Most of the information, however, is anecdotal; a cursory literature search turned up very little scientific work that quantifies the impact of noxious weeds on birds and other wildlife.

Common burdock was first documented in this country in a flora published in 1672 and is now widespread in the United States

and parts of Canada. Commonly used as a medicinal herb, the plant is also well-known to farmers and ranchers who consider it a serious agricultural weed. Burs can lodge in the skin, eyes, ears, mouth, throat, or stomachs of grazing animals, causing irritation and pain. In wild mammals such as coyotes or foxes, the burs can lodge in the fur, causing it to become matted and irritated.



NPS PHOTO BY ROSA M. WILSON

One of four ruby-throated hummingbirds stuck to the Velcro®-like seed heads of

The hummingbird-burdock incident at Rock Creek Park is a poignant example of yet another way exotic plant species imperil the health of natural ecosystems. This point was amplified at a September conference on exotic plants held at the Patuxent National Wildlife Visitor Center in Maryland. Hosted by the National Park Service, the conference focused on the management of exotic plants in general. A mount of one of the hummingbirds trapped in the seed head was displayed, however, and served as a graphic reminder of the importance of preserving native vegetation habitat for wildlife.

Unfortunately, burdock is not the only nonnative plant species that has invaded Rock Creek Park. Exotic vines such as porcelain berry, Asian bittersweet, and Japanese honeysuckle are choking out native vegetation and literally dragging native trees down

to the ground, destroying the upper canopy where warblers and other birds nest and thrive. Add this park's problems with exotic plant species to those of every other unit in the national park system and the scale of the problem nationwide begins to become apparent. The problem is so large that funds to combat exotics, staff positions dedicated to their control, and an organized nationwide approach for dealing with them have lagged far behind their pervasive, deleterious influence.

In early February, President Clinton signed an executive order formulating a federal strategy to deal with the problems of exotic species. The order proposes an increase of nearly \$29 million for combating exotic pests and diseases and accelerating research on habitat restoration and biological integrated pest management tactics. An Invasive Species Council, chaired by Interior Secretary Babbitt, Agriculture Secretary Glickman, and Commerce Secretary Daley, will cooperate with a variety of groups to carry out the strategy.