

M.A.G. Meeting Notes

10.00am Saturday 14th June 2025

The purpose of this meeting was to walk around Hell Wath to discuss 2025 activities relating to Himalayan Balsam (HB) bashing and Thistle management.

We started out from the clubhouse and walked down to the track. Matthew explained the overall strategy, which is to eradicate HB from the outer areas of Hell Wath (the wooded areas to the north and south of the site bordering the river) and then work inwards.

Good progress was made on the south side and in the 'river loop' last year where most HB plants were pulled by small teams (Map Ref B2 to E2). Inevitably some HB has grown this year. It was agreed at the end of the walk that a small team would meet at 7pm on Monday 16th June to scour this area and remove any new HB plants.

Walking down the steps to Snake Bend (Map Ref F1) we paused and Carol explained that a natural pathogenic rust had been applied to HB plants in this area as part of a test to see if it would be effective. We do not undertake HB Bashes in this area (Map Ref F1 to I2) to give the rust chance to spread. Hell Wath is one test site. Rust applications have been approved by CABA and have been applied in other areas of the Nidderdale National Landscape as well as Hell Wath. The rust does not kill HB, but it does weaken the plants so that HB is not able to crowd out native species. We know the rust has 'taken' as it has been observed on HB plants in the area of application and up to 60m away. It appears as brown rust coloured spots on both sides of the leaf, and if touched produces a rust coloured dust. We will continue to keep this area under observation and hope it will give us the upper hand in the control of HB on Hell Wath.



Moving along the path we stopped to look up the slope away from the river (Map Ref G2 & H2). Carol noted that the area at the end of the track had been cleared of scrub and that subsequently the area had been scythed to clear a swathe of HB, with pulling carried out in the surrounding undergrowth. Work in this area will continue this year and could be allocated to school age working parties.

This prompted a discussion on the merits of scything HB. Scything is not as effective as pulling individual plants as it leaves the root (and often stem nodes) which can grow back later in the season, but it is an effective way of clearing large swathes of HB. We noted that the aim is to prevent HB plants from seeding. HB plants are annuals, so it is the seeds from this year that will create the plants for next year. The more plants we can scythe or pull to prevent seeding this year, the fewer plants we will have next year. The scything strategy is to clear large areas of HB, once, maybe twice

this year with HB pulling to take place in the surrounding undergrowth to remove as many seeding plants as possible.

As we looked across this area of lower meadow we noted that the HB had not grown very tall. This is due to the very dry spring and early summer. We can expect this to change if we get sustained rainfall. We also noted that due to the hard, parched ground, pulling HB plants often resulted in the plants snapping and the roots being left behind. This is not ideal as the plant will regrow from the root. For now it was agreed that HB pulling would be most beneficial in shaded areas. The first HB Bash on 21st June will focus on the wooded north side from the top of the Fairy Steps to the pond (Map Ref P6/7 through to N5/6).

At this point we also briefly considered our strategy regarding thistles. Last year the thistle population exploded across the meadows and no action was taken to control them. This year we propose to top thistles growing around the perimeters of the meadows when they flower, leaving central patches to flower and go to seed for their habitat value.

Continuing our walk through the meadows we stopped briefly at the Quarry entrance (Map Ref K4). Matthew explained that having cleared the Quarry of undergrowth during the autumn/winter, much more light was now reaching the quarry floor – and HB was now much in evidence. Working parties would be needed to clear this (some volunteers have already started). This could be a good location for the HB Bash on 25th June if there has been no significant rainfall. The perimeter of the quarry should also be targeted.

Moving toward the pond Carol pointed out several areas that had previously been scythed (Map Ref K4, K5, and M5). There had also been intensive pulling along the river path. These areas showed much less HB growth and much greater native grass and plant species. Being open areas they could be a good location for St Wilfrid's pupils to HB Bash.

The pond and surrounding area (Map Ref M5 & N5) is a priority area and could be targeted on the 28th June and also allocated to the Youth Justice and Outwood pupils to keep clear.

We headed back to the Panthers Clubhouse, pausing at the rabbit-fence enclosures to review the difference they were making to the vegetation growth. We all agreed it had been a useful walk and that we had a plan to tackle HB and thistles.