

What can be done to prevent the spread of “invasive” plants on the Kenai Peninsula? Find out by attending Dandelion Sundae

by Toby Burke

Several exotic plant species have received national attention for the widespread havoc they have wrought on native plant and animal communities. In the arid west cheatgrass has displaced native sagebrush by making the region susceptible to frequent large scale wildfires that sagebrush cannot long survive. It has degraded vast areas of formerly productive rangeland impacting both native fauna and domestic stock. Purple loosestrife has degraded wetlands in the east by forming dense monocultures displacing diverse native wetland plant and animal communities, most notably impacting birdlife. Kudzu is overrunning the southeast smothering native vegetation as well as commercial forests and miles of electrical transmission lines. Unfortunately, several invasive plant species have the potential to become pests on regional and even continental scales.

With that in mind, the exotic or non-native plants persisting on your property may not be as benign as you think. They may have the potential to escape and become invasive plants affecting not only our urban landscape but the larger landscape as well. Accordingly, natural resource agencies and local citizens are becoming increasingly concerned about non-native, invasive plants and the many problems they pose for native flora and fauna and the quality life we residents enjoy on the Kenai Peninsula.

While not all non-native plants are necessarily invasive more than a few are and they can cause irreparable harm to an ecosystem and its constituent parts.

Invasive plants can adversely alter natural ecological processes. They may be capable of causing major, possibly irreversible, alteration or disruption of these processes by altering geomorphology, hydrology, or fire regimes. They can adversely alter natural community structure by changing the density of a layer of vegetation, creating a new layer, or eliminating one or more layers. They can adversely alter natural community composition resulting in the extirpation of one or more native species, reducing biodiversity or chang-

ing the community composition towards species exotic to the natural community. They can adversely alter higher trophic levels impacting animals, fungi, microbes, and other organisms in the community it invades.

More specifically they can alter geomorphologic patterns by increasing erosion by thinning or eliminating native plants that once formed a dense layer of roots holding sediments in place. Or conversely they can completely cover sediments that were naturally unvegetated. They can alter hydrological patterns by changing stream flow and sedimentation rates. They can change water chemistry and accelerate the eutrophication of lacustrine waters (lakes and ponds), fluviate waters (streams and rivers), and even marine (coastal) waters. They can change fire regimes by altering the temporal and spatial distribution and severity of fires. They can change the entire structure of plant and animal communities. They can extirpate species or populations of species and reduce biodiversity. They can also be unpalatable to domestic livestock and some aquatic invasives can physically clog lakes and streams impeding navigation. The list goes on and on.

The ubiquitous and exotic common dandelion, found on the margins of roads, trails, sidewalks, driveways, parking lots, campgrounds, and in lawns has become the “poster child” for invasive plants. Like many invasive plant species they readily colonize disturbed areas and can often be difficult if not impossible to eradicate once established in the botanical community. This plant is probably the most familiar invasive we have on the Kenai Peninsula and it can serve to introduce concerned citizens to a larger cadre of invasive plants especially ones likely to be encountered locally.

On Sunday May 20th, from 1 - 4 p.m., the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge along with the Kenai Watershed Forum, the Kenai Soil and Water Conservation District, the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service, and River City Books will host the third annual “Dandelion Sundae” at the Refuge Visi-

tor Center/Headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna. Come rain or shine and bring a grocery-sized bag of dandelions and any other invasive plants that you can readily identify and remove. Alternately, you may come and pick invasives around refuge headquarters to prevent their spread to adjacent refuge trails. Then, give us your bag of invasives and you will receive a free ice cream sundae.

Prizes will be awarded for outstanding effort and free invasive plant guides will be given away to aid in identification and control of invasives of local concern such as Canada thistle, reed canary grass, cheatgrass, common toadflax, oxeye daisy, orange and yellow flowered hawkweeds, brittlestem hempenettle, bird

vetch, Scotch broom, white and yellow sweet clovers, Siberian peashrub and others. Become informed and contribute to the effort to prevent and control the spread of invasive plants in your community and adjacent wildlands. For further event details or recommendations on where to go “weed pulling” contact Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021.

Toby Burke is a biological technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in invasive plant surveys for the refuge and he will be one of the hosts of Dandelion Sundae. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.