

Bears in Toft? Maybe not, but...

There's a popular story, beloved of very young children – you may know it: *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*.

The Bourn Brook which runs through our village, the one that floods from time to time, suffers the scourge of two invasive, listed plants: Himalayan Balsam and Giant Hogweed. The summer's task of several intrepid volunteers (organised by the local Wildlife Trust) aimed to rid our little stream of these unwanted alien invaders.

The premise of the children's story is that the family push their way through grass (*swishy swashy, swishy swashy*), through water (*splash splosh, splash splosh*), through mud (*squelch squirch, squelch squirch*), through a dark forest (*stumble trip, stumble trip*), until they finally find a great big **Bear**...

One bright Sunday morning early in July, a few somewhat eccentric grown-ups re-enacted the scene – but now for 'Bear' read 'Balsam'... Our mission: to wade along sections of the stream bed, looking for any balsam plant, in flower or not, and uprooting it. Balsam, while beloved of bees, is unwelcome because it crowds out the smaller native species, which in turn create the habitat for water voles and other small creatures. We were on the lookout, too, for any hogweed; while steering well clear of it – it's a vicious plant, whose hairs can cause skin irritation virtually for years after direct contact with it – we were to pinpoint its location so that it could be dealt with later by the 'experts'.

Each of us was kitted out in armpit-high waders (heavy, sweat-inducing garments), thick gloves and a sturdy stick, before four of us set off in pairs across the field (the others departing to work on another section of the stream). Definitely the *swishy swashy* experience this: nettles, thistles and grasses grew to head-height, with no obvious path through, but we gallantly ploughed across it, raising clouds of biting insects as we went. Then *squelch squirch* down the steep river bank, and *splash splosh* dropping down into the muddy water below, the tall trees closing in overhead – and here we were in a quiet, mysterious green world. One couple took the upstream way, the other the downstream route.

Between Toft and the Caldecote road the brook takes a fiercely wandering course, meanders within meanders. A useful tip if you ever happen to have the need to wade along a winding stream: the shallower water is on the *outside* of the bend. Unfortunately, balsam grows where it will (the seeds are scattered by exploding from their seedpods, and are then carried away to land anywhere along the stream's course) – so the deeper water had to be tackled, like it or not: not so much *splash splosh*, rather more like *help, I just might be drowning!*

In murky water, we probed with our sticks to guide our passage. Beneath our feet we felt first soft mud and then firm gravel, but the way was full of obstructions: fallen trees, thick branches and tangled roots in some places blocked the stream from side to side. At other points floodwaters had carried seeds high up the bank, and we clambered up the slippery slope to seek out the pesky balsam, pull it up with its claw-like roots, and throw it high onto the bank to dry out and cause no further damage.

Under the cover of the trees all was quiet and calm. We heard few birds, just the faint breeze rustling leaves high above, and below the gentle ripple of slowly flowing water. There was the fresh scent of undisturbed earth, and the more rank odour of mud stirred up by our fumbling feet. We stumbled and tripped our way slowly from one bend to the next, never knowing what would be around the corner. At one place, where the bank dropped down low, a new meander was forming. Earlier floodwaters had risen high above the stream's normal bed, carrying seeds across a wider area: not just balsam, but nettles, grasses and many other plants too – including a single Giant Hogweed, which stood majestically like a sentinel lighthouse with its huge, broad white umbels raised to the light filtering down from above. The whole plant rose 6 or 8 feet straight up above the woodland floor like some menacing triffid. We gave it a wide berth, but its location was noted on a GPS so that it could be visited at a later time, and summary execution performed.

And so we *squelch squirched* and *stumble tripped* onwards, seeking out balsam as we went. Some are 8-foot giants, others are tiny seedlings nestling sweetly in the meadow grass beside the brook. The hunt for the plant along this stream will go on for years: just one plant ejecting its seeds into the water

can re-seed a huge area very quickly, but already there are fewer to find than last year, and the year before. Throughout the summer the pursuit has continued along different sections of the stream which eventually, some miles to the east, flows into the more mighty Cam.

So if you should espy any of these pretty pink flowers – even if you do have to do a bit of *squelch squirching* or *stumble tripping* – do please try to pull it up and throw it high in the hedge where it can wither and die. Or you might even consider joining us next year in our continuing battle against this alien invader...

Katherine James

NB: This piece was written with more than a nod of acknowledgement – a bow, maybe – to that respected master of the carefully chosen word Michael Rosen, author of *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*.