



*Searching for rubbish on the river*

Our final litter pick of the year took place on Saturday the 16th of October when 12 members met at the footbridge on Foss Islands Road. With three persons allocated to the CYC boat/pontoon to pick litter off the water surface, the remainder split up to cover the river banks and adjacent areas downstream to Blue Bridge at the junction with the River Ouse.

The usual black spots were at the Castle car park, the Castle Mills lock/bridge area and on this occasion at the rear of the telephone exchange. The pictures show an action shot of the Council boat/pontoon and a group photograph taken at Castle Mills Lock. We collected a significant amount of rubbish; as a result of wearing tabards, the RFS gained many positive comments from members of the public. This was most apparent when

## Rubbish!

we returned to the start point and were offloading all the waste from the boat/pontoon and placing it onto a CYC vehicle for disposal.

My grateful thanks go to those RFS members who turned up on the day, and to Mark, the CYC skipper of the



*Some of the rewards*

boat. Next year's litter picks will take place in April, July, August and October.

*Barry Thomas*

## Cat-astrophe



In September, I was called to rescue a cat from the Foss using my paddle board. The cat took a lot of finding, as it was quiet, but I knew roughly where it was as reported by pet rescue.

They didn't know how to recover it safely.

The cat was huddling face in to a drain tube, very wet and frightened. Perhaps it thought the duck weed was grass, so it must have fallen into the water and tried to get out via this pipe just above the water line.

A friend brought a cat box, some food and some gloves. I grabbed the cat's tail, as it was afraid to come out, but I got it out, even though it was scratching and squealing. I put it in the cat box as quickly as I could while trying to stay balanced on the board!

We took it to a local vet, who found its name, which is Sky. They called Sky's owners to come and collect him/her.

So it was a happy ending. If I hadn't been able to find this cat, I doubt he/she would have survived without another swim because the wall is difficult to climb with the path overhanging the river at this point, and the river is deep there. Anyway it was another good use for the paddle board.

*Tim Rane*

2021 was the fourth year in which we put significant effort into tackling this dominant, invasive plant along the lower reaches of the Foss. Logically we would like to have started at the head of the river, but most of the area above Strensall is private land and so only accessible with permission, and that means finding out who the riparian owners are – not a simple task in these days of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) etc. Being agricultural land, getting to much of it is fraught too, even when permission has been granted, as it usually seems to be when we do know who to ask. Farmland is not designed to make getting at all its watercourses easy, and farmers have far more pressing tasks than seeking it out year upon year to eliminate it.

Himalayan balsam outgrows pretty much all our native species, even the nettles it so likes to hide behind and between, but when it dies

back each winter, it leaves the banks with no root structure and so liable to erosion. As it grows in dense clumps and gradually spreads outwards, it implacably swallows large areas of ground, and doesn't even mind quite dense shade.

It is widespread over the whole catchment; I've even seen it on the roadside above Pond Head reservoir. It grows along many drainage ditches having been carried up them during periods of flooding. As a consequence, it has hundreds of little colonies hiding away from us.

It is a daunting task we have set ourselves:

- Each plant is capable of producing 7-800 seeds which can be dispersed by wind or water: the resultant seed bank will last 3 – 5 years with at least some of them germinating and producing new plants every year.
- If a plant is pulled or chopped leaving the lowest node intact, it will grow again immediately.
- Any disturbance of the soil allows the seed-bank to germinate and establishes a new colony before anything else has a chance to get going.
- It is only readily identified, other than close to, when in flower, not leaving much time before going to seed for us to find it and tackle it

What have we done so far? This year we have pulled, scythed or strimmed about 75% of the growth between Monk Bridge and Walbutt's above Strensall. Much of what we have not tackled is in small clumps well spread out and so time consuming to get to, or is on the opposite bank on private land where we have not been able to determine ownership. For the first time this year a small band of intrepid volunteers did a

lot of pulling from the river or on the far bank above water-level, with permission from the various riparian owners, indeed with their help on some occasions – thank you! Thank you also to all, members and non-members, who tackled various areas of balsam local to them, and in some cases adopted lengths of the bank. This is really the heart of it – people who care enough to pile in and help!

We are winning, slowly, where we have attacked it for a few years. But the crucial question is what

are we going to do to ramp up our efforts?

It's obvious that we need to get upstream and prevent recontamination of the areas we are tackling. This not a simple task. First, we have to find it and second, we have to get at it – which needs both intelligence (in the military sense – if we had any in the other sense, we probably wouldn't be doing this at all!) and boots on the ground. Here we struggle.

There are a couple of straws in the wind though. Firstly, there is a possibility of some input from NYCC and the Environment Agency, who have said that (ideally!) they would like to prevent the imminent flood alleviation area above Strensall from becoming contaminated and so might be able to have an input. Secondly, NEYDC (North & East Yorkshire Ecological Data Centre) have a drone which, given some funding at our end, might be available to do a survey during the next flowering season. It seems that the Foss is on the map, whether because of our efforts or because it's a small self-contained catchment remains to be seen.

So much for the dreams – we'll spend the winter planning our next campaign. Publicity is going to be key, and if anyone has access to any means by which we can spread the word next year, or could help us get some publicity in any (legal) way, please come forth.

*Mike Gray*

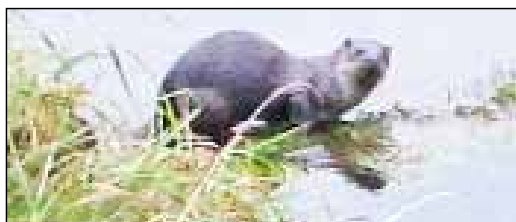
## Himalayan Balsam



# Foss Mammals

quite a bit recently about otters and mink, regarding Covid in farmed mink, but also over many months concerning the effect each of them has on the environment.

We have both of these mammals along the Foss from time to time, and have had quite a few reports, as well as photos and videos, confirming their presence. We are particularly concerned about the presence of mink. They are non-native invasive predators and are voracious



*An otter seen in the Foss*

hunters with a particular appetite for water voles (think Ratty in *Wind in the Willows*); it is the lack of recent sightings of these rare native rodents that concerns us. We know they were around a couple of years ago, as we went looking for them and found traces in quite a few places. Since then though, we've had no further reports and our vole rafts – used as latrines – remained pristine (until the Internal Drainage Board [IDB] mowed them).

This is where you could help us, please. We need more information to enable us to assess the true situation. We'd like to hear all and any reports of the presence of either mammal (plus any water voles!), and if photos are possible, then so much the better. We will log all the reports we get over the first six months of 2021 and then publish our findings. So, if you see anything, please let the RFS know, via email, [info@riverfoss-society.co.uk](mailto:info@riverfoss-society.co.uk) or our Facebook page [@riverfossociety](https://www.facebook.com/riverfossociety).

To help you work out which is which ... Otters are a protected native species and present little threat to water voles. They can be up to twice as big as mink, and tend to be nocturnal. Mink are more likely to be active during the day. Otters are also less likely to be seen in family groups and have a distinctive



*Both otters (large prints) and mink (small prints) have walked on this vole raft.*

chocolate brown colouring with a clearly visible creamy colour chin/chest patch. Mink are generally a blacker brown and more obviously furry.

*Mike Gray*

Last November I was approached by Mike Knox who was intending to make a visit by kayak up the River Foss (weather permitting), starting from the River Ouse at Bishopthorpe. Mike asked me questions about the Foss – depth, obstructions, and getting round Castle Mills Lock.

A few days later Mike reported that it had not been too difficult getting around the Lock. Getting in again downstream of the lock was tricky due to the distance between the path and water level. He managed to go upstream to White Cross, Huntington Road (where the old railway line bridge crosses), and said perhaps he could have gone a bit further, but decided

## Happy paddling

it was enough for the day. He also told me he does the kayaking predominantly for exercise, so long paddles are good!

Mike hopes to revisit the River Foss again and says it was certainly a



*Heading into the Foss at Blue Bridge. The Foss Barrier is in the distance.*

different perspective from using the pavement or road. In some places it took some time to get his bearings. When he goes next and has a little more time he intends to test how far he can physically get upstream. (Remember that was from Bishopthorpe and back in November!).



*Approaching Rowntrees Wharf and Wormalds Cut – the target for the Inland Waterways Association's Silver Propeller Challenge*

He has the RFS's congratulations for doing the trip and thanks for providing photographs and a report. The RFS's send their best wishes for his next trip.

*Peter Hopwood*

## A welcome visitor

Back in the summer Tom Walters and his cousin were walking along the Foss and at the Earswick footbridge they decided to go down to the riverside under the bridge. There was a joint double take when they saw a long silver tail amongst the waving river weed. A few suspenseful moments later it reappeared, showing itself in full. It was clearly a decent sized eel, which then happily swam up and downstream in front of them as they watched on in awe. It then disappeared into the shallower water close to the bank.

Having decided to record this, Tom did not manage to photograph the whole creature, but the picture shows that it was indeed an eel, and a rather pale one at that. He tells us that it was around 40cm in length.

We passed this on to a couple of our fishing members



*Swimming in the shallows*

and they agreed with Tom that it was a European eel, as it matched the size, shape, colour and habitat. Once common in the Foss, they are now a critically endangered species, declining worldwide due to wetland developments and building of large obstacles on rivers.

Apparently, by its size it seems to have been quite a mature eel. At that stage, they are headed back to the Sargasso Sea, thousands of km away, to spawn and then die.

Perhaps the most encouraging thing is that there could be more than just one eel in the Foss. Apparently eels are able to 'migrate' overland to deal with obstructions such as weirs. We were told that in the 1960s, when eels were common in the river, they were often seen in great numbers slithering up the side of the bank to get past the weir at Haxby landing! Presumably

this one had made the same overland journey to bypass the Castle Mills lock too.

## Did you know that the River Foss Society is on Facebook too?

*Seen below is Callum, a regular fisherman on the Foss, who proudly displays a 9 to 10 lb (4 to 4.5 kg) pike he has just caught between Blue Bridge and the Foss Barrier (in the background).*

*He asked one of our members, who happened to be passing, to take a photograph for him. Our member also took this photo with Callum's consent.*



*At long last - the large blockage on the river at Haxby Wier was cleared just before Christmas. The work with the digger also dealt with drainage dykes flowing into the river. Thanks to Bill Twist for the photograph.*

### On the Foss

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