

# **ELY VALLEY SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST**



Monk's-hood, Ely Valley Photograph © Carole Newberry, CCW

## **YOUR SPECIAL SITE AND ITS FUTURE**

‘Your Special Site and its Future’ is part of our commitment to improve the way we work with SSSI owners and occupiers. In it, we try to explain what is special about the wildlife on your site, and what care is needed to look after it into the future.

All SSSI are considered to be of national importance and we recognise the crucial role that owners and occupiers play in their management and protection. We need you to share your views and knowledge of this site with us, to help safeguard it.

We hope that you will find ‘Your Special Site and its Future’ interesting and helpful. Please contact us if there is anything about the site and its management that you would like to discuss.

## **What is ‘special’ about the wildlife of the Ely Valley SSSI?**

The Ely Valley SSSI has one special feature:

A strong population of **monkshood** growing on the banks of the river and its tributary ditches.

Monkshood is a perennial plant that grows mainly along lowland streams and riverbanks, especially where they are shaded by trees. Although it occurs from Scotland to Cornwall as a garden ‘escape’ the only truly native monkshood plants are found in Glamorgan, Gwent, parts of the Welsh Marches, and down into Devon. Even within this range it is not common. The Vale of Glamorgan is one of its strongholds, and hence we have a special responsibility for its conservation.

In addition, the River Ely is important for otters, which have re-colonised the Vale of Glamorgan in recent years.

## **What do we want the Ely Valley SSSI to look like?**

The following is a description of how we would like to see the Ely Valley:

*The river meanders between fields and small woods and is bordered by trees for most of its length. In places the former course of the river can be traced as marsh or wet woodland alongside its present course. Many fields are separated by tree-lined ditches or streams, and very few are grazed right up to the edge of the river.*

*Wherever the banks are shaded by trees, clumps of monkshood are found. The first young leaves appear in February, round and low on the ground. By April, tall stems with feathery, light green leaves are obvious and in May the spikes of blue delphinium-like flowers appear. After flowering, however, they quickly die back, and by the end of the summer little trace of the plants remains.*

## **What management is needed on the Ely Valley SSSI, and why?**

Ely Valley is an excellent place for wildlife, and while the site actually requires relatively little management to protect the monkshood plants, there are certain key factors that need to be managed. CCW’s priority is to work with you to achieve this. We place a great importance on our relationships with owners and occupiers, because without your help, it will be impossible for us to safeguard the special features on your land.

## **What does this mean in practice?**

There is some management that is essential to conserve the special feature. Other management actions could damage the features within a very short time. These are the ones we regard as the most important

**Shading by trees** provides conditions that suit the monkshood. Most of the plants are growing under trees and bushes such as alder and hazel. The ideal would be to have more or less complete tree canopy along the riverbanks. A serious threat to the alder lining the river is a fungus called *Phytophthora*, which can thrive in areas where the soil moisture content is high. Currently there is little that can be done to prevent damage by this fungus although there is research being carried out into its distribution, effects, and control.

**Control of grazing animals.** Monkshood only thrives out of the reach of grazing animals – either where the banks are fenced off from pasture, or naturally protected by bramble or scrub, or simply in inaccessible places low on the riverbank. It may have been deliberately removed from the more accessible places in the past, as it is poisonous to livestock. Monk's-hood will also survive where grazing is light, as stock do not generally eat the plant.

Where riverbanks are currently grazed right up to the edge, fencing and tree planting would increase potential monkshood habitat. This would also have advantages for otters, which use undisturbed areas of dense vegetation to rest.

#### **Control of invasive plants.**

The commonest non-native invasive plant on the Ely is Himalayan balsam, an annual which grows less fast than monkshood in the early spring and so does not compete



Japanese Knotweed. Photograph © Gill Barter, CCW

too strongly with it. Ideally, as an alien invasive plant, Himalayan balsam should be removed where it occurs, however, Japanese knotweed would be a more serious problem and it would be desirable to eradicate any that is found.



Himalayan Balsam. Photograph © Gill Barter, CCW.

Native plants can also be potentially damaging to the monkshood, for example, bramble could smother the plants. However, dominance by bramble is often a temporary stage when, for instance, young trees are growing up to replace an old one that has fallen.

#### **Finally**

Our knowledge and understanding of wildlife is continually improving. It is possible that new issues may arise in the future, whilst other issues may disappear. This statement is written with the best information we have now, but may have to change in the future as our understanding improves. Any information you can provide on the wildlife of your site, its management and its conservation would be much appreciated.

**If you would like to discuss any aspect of your SSSI, or have any concerns about your SSSI, please contact your local CCW office.**

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