

## Orange Balsam *Impatiens capensis*

**Bob Ellis 2004**

When James Goodwin and I surveyed the vegetation of Wheatfen during the spring of 2000, we found seedlings of orange balsam in some abundance in almost all parts of the reserve, especially on raised areas in the willow carr. Not all of these develop into full-grown plants and even fewer manage to flower. However, some do bloom in late summer, especially when they are in the open on the edges of the marshes and dykes, and when they do, the bright, pendulous, spurred flowers catch the eye like sparkling orange jewels.

Orange balsam is a member of the family *Balsaminaceae* and the genus *Impatiens* includes the 'busy lizzies', which are so familiar to gardeners. There are four species that grow wild in Britain but only one of these; touch-me-not balsam *Impatiens noli-tangere* is native to the British Isles and then only to parts of the north and west of the country. Of the other three, small balsam *Impatiens parviflora* comes from central Asia, Indian balsam *Impatiens glandulifera* from the Himalayas and orange balsam from North America. The latter was probably first introduced into cultivation in Britain in the very early 19th century and in an article from 1964 (below), Ted describes how it spread in Norfolk.

Although the flowers appear orange from a distance, they are more of a rich egg-yolk yellow with coppery red blotches. These reddish marks sometimes merge together such that the lower lip of the flower is almost entirely copper-red, however, the spur usually remains yellow. This long spur is actually formed from the lower sepal and is usually abruptly bent just before the tip. In common with the other balsams, orange balsam has fruit that explode when touched, scattering their seeds in all directions.

The leaves are hairless and are characteristically matt and very slightly bluish green in colour. They are sparsely and shallowly toothed. The plants at Wheatfen are often affected by mildew. Unlike its larger and invasive cousin, Indian balsam *Impatiens glandulifera*, which is also known as 'Himalayan balsam' or 'policeman's helmets', orange balsam does not seem to pose a threat to other species and I think it is a welcome addition to the diversity of the reserve.

*In the Countryside*

### **A Jewel - but it's a weed**

Surlingham, June 7. 1964

The orange balsam or jewel weed of Canada, introduced at a lake near Aylsham in 1927, soon found its way to the banks of the Bure and by means of its floating seeds spread downstream and eventually colonised a vast area of reeds and reed swamps round broads lower down the valley.

During the 1940s it moved up the Ant to Barton Broad and up the Thurne to Potter Heigham and Martham; in both cases its seeds were able to travel upstream with the tides. In 1959 it invaded Rockland and Surlingham broads and the banks of the River Yare with extraordinary suddenness following a winter in which freak tides made it possible for floating seeds to go down the Bure to Yarmouth and be swept up the Yare.

When I voyaged down this river to Breydon a few days ago I saw great masses of jewel weed forming miniature forests on lines of tide refuse from Brundall to Cantley, but further down salt water appears to inhibit the growth of these plants.

Today I noticed several fine specimens of another recent colonist of river mud here at Surlingham. These were the Western (Green) Figwort *Scrophularia umbrosa*. At the beginning of this century this species was known from only one locality in Norfolk - Scoulton Mere. In recent years it has been turning up in a number of fresh localities, chiefly on riverside mud. It has been established at Harford Bridges, near Norwich, for some years and it is well established at Old Lakenham and now it has increased considerably farther downstream.

I believe that coypus helped it to gain a footing in many new places by exposing areas of mud by the waterside.

**E.A.E.**

