

# ragwort ravers

When will these people realise it's just a highly noxious weed?

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I expect it won't be long before the usual suspects join the crusade. And perhaps *Countrysidefile* will jump on to the bandwagon and make ragwort the programme's logo – so joining the Isle of Man, where the national flower is, unbelievably, "cushag" (ragwort).

## Not on the menu

In particular, I love the myth that insects swarm to the flowering heads of ragwort. While I was at the National Trust site Collards Hill with Lulu recently, we looked at the ragwort and – I hate to break it to you groupies

*'When I was a boy, we all considered ourselves to be ragwort pullers'*

– the yellow flower was deserted. The large number of nectaring butterflies and other insects in the vicinity clearly preferred the red clover, flowering bramble and pyramidal orchids. They seemed in full agreement with the old country name of "Mare's Fart", which rather too accurately describes the scent of ragwort.

## Out of control

Yes, I concede, the ragwort plant is the foodplant of the attractive cinnabar moth (below). But the moths managed before ragwort was allowed to get out of control.

The reason for ragwort's rampant state is simply that people have become separated from nature. People just don't understand how the country's life cycle works.

When I was a boy, you just didn't see ragwort around – if an odd plant emerged, it was immediately pulled. Who by? Everyone and anyone. We all considered ourselves to be ragwort pullers.

Now some cereal farmers completely ignore the ragwort thriving in their fields – it is



not their problem and so they don't bother.

It is illegal for landowners to have ragwort on their land, but certain local councils, the Highways Agency and Network Rail are often in flagrant breach of the law. Nothing is done about it but, in my view, the police, Defra and Trading Standards should enforce the law.

If I failed to pay my council tax, I would be prosecuted. If the councils that take my tax do not abide by the law, why aren't they prosecuted too?

## The honey trap

There is another sinister side to the ragwort blight. The toxins in ragwort attack the liver, causing irreversible cirrhosis, which is quickly fatal to horses and leads to a slow death for cattle. But what about people? Does honey made from the nectar and pollen of ragwort contain these toxins?

Honey often has a distinctive taste according to the plants from which the bees obtain their nectar. Bill Turnbull, in his very funny book *The Bad Beekeepers Club* (Sphere £7.99), notes his particular hatred of honey made from the nectar and pollen of ivy. So, what about honey made from flowering ragwort?

Professor Derek Knottenbelt of Liverpool University, the country's leading authority on the toxicity of ragwort, will not eat honey from areas infested with ragwort, neither will his family – no Scottish honey for them, then.

(Incidentally, how can honey ever be labelled "organic"? Once out of the hive, surely bees can go where they like – even to flowers covered in pesticides, if that's what they fancy?)

Astonishingly, the Food Standards Agency has no information on the subject of toxins in honey, although liver complaints in general are rising steadily.

There is also another potential threat. If the buildup in cattle is slow, young beef animals will arrive on our tables before ragwort kills them. But that's not to say their livers don't already contain an accumulation of ragwort toxins.

## Thanks to the NOTW

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However, many years ago when I tilted at the Ministry of Social Security, my then employers, they sacked me for breaking the Official Secrets Acts.

All I had done was publicise the outrage of social security abuse, because the politicians were organising a cover-up and telling "whoppers" and "porkies" – no change there, then. Aged 26, in the late Sixties, I was an innocent country boy in a hostile world. The farm was too small for me to join my father and brother so I had to make my way elsewhere.

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ALAMY GARDENPICTURE.COM



The killing fields: ragwort is potentially lethal to horses and cattle and there's too

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They paid me the equivalent of a year's salary, which gave me the start I needed as a writer.

And, many thousands of words and 30-odd books down the road, here I am, still doing it.

Without the *News of the World*, I would not have been writing this article and almost certainly would not have had the freedom to take on the

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# Countrydiary



By Robin Page

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Speeding the march are the "ragwort worshippers" who say the poisonous plant is crucial to conservation, and describe its proven toxicity as "myth" and "scaremongering".

No doubt these ragwort groupies would lambast the practice of cutting back every bit of spare vegetation in sight from March to November to make silage, wiping out all the wildlife that would find a home in the lost plants over the summer.

Yet those of us who try to farm responsibly and make hay, which gives flowers, insects, birds and several mammals a decent start in life, are criticised for pulling out ragwort so it doesn't end up in our haystacks.

I expect it won't be long before the usual suspects join the crusade. And perhaps *Countryfile* will jump on to the bandwagon and make ragwort the programme's logo - so joining the Isle of Man, where the national flower is, unbelievably, "cushag" (ragwort).

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It is illegal for landowners to have ragwort on their land, but certain local councils, the Highways Agency and Network Rail are often in flagrant breach of the law. Nothing is done about it but, in my view, the police, Defra and Trading Standards should enforce the law.

If I failed to pay my council tax, I would be prosecuted. If the councils that take my tax do not abide by the law, why aren't they prosecuted too?

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**Bee Wilson** Cutting the mustard: a sharp warning from Dijon [telegraph.co.uk/food](http://telegraph.co.uk/food)

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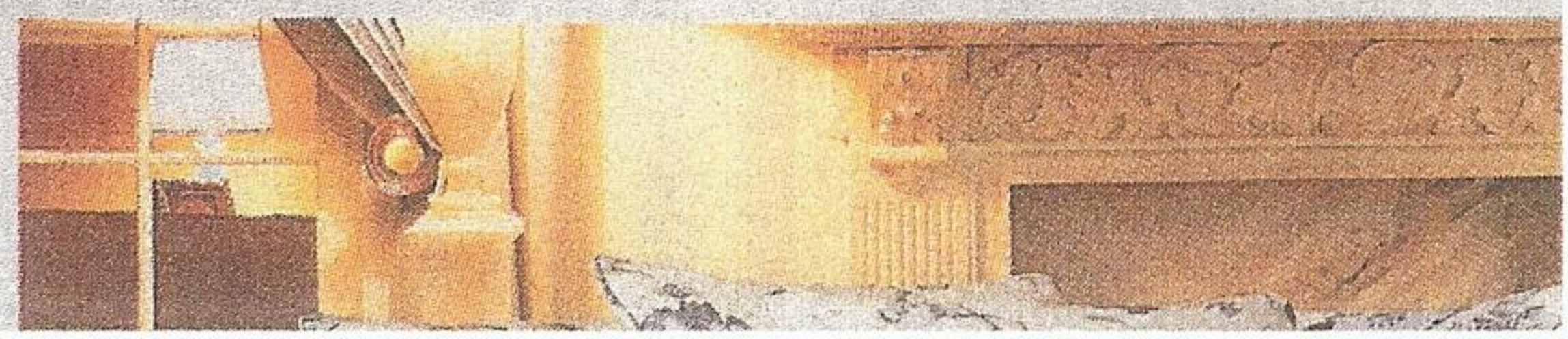
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# Re-thinking the ragwort threat

The danger to animals posed by flowering ragwort at this time of year has been greatly over-played, says **Howard Frost.**

TRAVELLING south recently, I was struck by the lush growth of ragwort along roadside verges stretching from Yorkshire to Kent.

Good for wildlife, I thought. Ragwort is a major nectar plant for insects including many butterflies, and the plant on which several important moths lay their eggs.

Visiting a nature reserve I noted someone had uprooted just about every ragwort plant along half a mile of trackside leaving it to die there.

It was an example of the mistaken actions people sometimes take when they wrongly perceive a danger.

"Ragwort is poisonous so we must get rid of it" must have been someone's reasoning.

But pulling up a ragwort plant and leaving it by the trackside simply creates a another problem rather than curing one.

The danger for animals is in the shrivelled up dead plant, especially in hay.

Horses in particular will rarely touch live ragwort, probably because it doesn't taste nice, and the bite they learn from is unlikely to have any serious effect.

In fact, studies suggest they need to ingest five percent to 25 per cent of their body weight to cause death. That's quite a lot.

It is often overlooked that there are six species of ragwort.

Only one of them is referred



**MISUNDERSTOOD:** Ragwort is one of the favourite nectar plants of the Ringlet butterfly.

PICTURE: JESIKA AND JIM BONE

to in the Weeds Act of 1959, namely our native "common" ragwort, *Senecio jacobaea*.

But they all look very similar. You need to be quite an expert to tell the difference.

The sad thing is that people who declare unthinking war against ragwort could be

unwittingly destroying rare plants like the hoary ragwort.

There is also a lot of misunderstanding about Oxford ragwort which is usually found on brownfield sites such as disused industrial areas and railway sidings and is unlikely to cause any problems to animals.

I have spoken to various vets about the frequency of deaths amongst horses and cattle as a result of eating ragwort.

"Quite rare", is the invariable answer. But the problem is that no-one really knows. The symptoms are the same as for any other liver ailment, and post-mortems to get to the bottom of it are rarely carried out.

So ragwort gets the blame for all, even though it may be responsible for none.

Few people realise that the poisons found in ragwort are also found in other common wild plants which might

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even be more to blame than ragwort itself.

A much publicised figure of 6,500 horse deaths per year appears to be based on a tiny sample of 'suspected' but unproven cases, subjected to questionable calculations to scale them up to a national figure.

A more scientifically based Defra report indicates only 10 proven animal deaths between 2005 and 2010.

This result matches similar official surveys in France and the Netherlands. There may be a problem, but it appears to be very small.

The 1959 Weeds Act does not require landowners to report or pull up ragwort

wherever it occurs on their land.

It simply provides the Government with a means of stepping in if and where a serious problem arises.

Only then, when faced with a Government order, must a landowner take action.

Equally, the Ragwort Control Act 2003 places no obligations on landowners.

It was introduced to enable the Government to produce a Code of Practice for the control of ragwort. This is guidance, not law.

It suggests that it is wise to remove any ragwort growing in or within 50/100m of a field used for grazing horses or cattle, or for hay production.

These distances are based on scientific studies which indicate most seed drops close to its source plant.

Some 30 different insects depend directly on common ragwort.

These include the beautiful cinnabar moth with its black and yellow caterpillars which actually extract some of the poison from the plant to make themselves unpalatable to other predators.

Sadly, there are local authorities and even wildlife trusts which have publicised incorrect information about ragwort leading to its unnecessary destruction to the detriment of our biodiversity.

If vast numbers of horses are really dying from ragwort poisoning every year, then common sense suggests the fault must lie with the management of paddocks and hayfields, not with the presence of ragwort in the wider countryside.

**Howard Frost writes on behalf of Butterfly Conservation Yorkshire and can be contacted via [www.yorkshirebutterflies.org.uk](http://www.yorkshirebutterflies.org.uk) where you can also find the latest news on Yorkshire's butterflies and moths.**



## EVENTS

### CRAFTS/FAIRS

#### Huddersfield

**Vintage Fair:** Vintage fashion and homewares, Byram Arcade, Aug 13, 10am-4pm. [www.byramarcade.com](http://www.byramarcade.com)

**Summer Fayre:** Packed with arts and crafts stalls, workshops and tours, Lawrence Batley Theatre, Aug 13, 10am-4pm. [www.thelbt.org](http://www.thelbt.org)

#### Skipton

**Crafts/Antique & Collectors Fairs:** Town Hall, Aug 15, 17 & 19. 01282 430670.

### FAMILY

#### Bradford

**Funny Bones:** Create paper animations and hear stories from the books, National Media Museum, Aug 13-19. [www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk](http://www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk)

#### Castleford

**Xscape Island:** Free family activities with a beach and surf simulator, Xscape, to Aug 21. [www.xscape.co.uk](http://www.xscape.co.uk)

#### Harrogate

**The Great Garden Adventure:** A garden safari, RHS Garden Harlow Carr, to Aug 31. 10am-4pm.

### Knarborough

**Arts and Crafts:** Make a jester hat and stained glass window, Knarborough Castle, Aug 13, 1-4pm. 01423 556188.

#### Malton

**Become a History Detective:** Roman finds and activity packs for families, Malton Museum, to Sept 30, 9.30am-4.30pm. 01653 695136.

#### Scarborough

**Husky Hiking for all the Family:** Kennel visits, Husky visits Hiking fun for all the family, Pesky Husky Trekking centre Staintondale. For prices, visit [peskyhusky.co.uk](http://peskyhusky.co.uk) or 01723 870521.

### FOOD

#### Huddersfield

**Food and Drink Festival:** The town is awash with culinary delights, St George's Square, to Aug 14, from 10am. 01484 480890, [www.huddersfield-htcpl.co.uk/foodanddrinkfestival](http://www.huddersfield-htcpl.co.uk/foodanddrinkfestival)

### GARDEN

#### Austwick

**Open Garden:** Austwick Hall, Town Head Lane, Aug 14, noon-5pm. [www.austwickhall.co.uk](http://www.austwickhall.co.uk)

### Castleford

**Open Garden:** Little Eden, Lancaster St, Aug 14, 10am-4pm. 01977-514275.

#### Garforth

**Open Garden:** Millrace Nursey, Selby Rd, Aug 14, 1-5pm. 0113 286 9233, [www.millrace-plants.co.uk](http://www.millrace-plants.co.uk)

#### Kettlewell

**Scarecrow Festival:** Over 100 life-sized scarecrows, children's trail and refreshments, Kettlewell village, Aug 13-24. [www.kettlewell.info](http://www.kettlewell.info)

### MUSEUMS

#### Bradford

**Ray Harryhausen:** A Chance to see the iconic animation and artwork of the man who worked on Jason and the Argonauts, to Oct. [www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk](http://www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk)

#### Golcar

**West Riding in Miniature:** A display of miniature vernacular buildings, Colne Valley Museum, to Sept 25, 2-5pm. 01484 659762.

#### Gomersal

**Victorian-style family fun:** A variety of entertaining crafts, games and activities, Red House Museum. to Sept

4, 11am to 4pm Mon-Fri, noon to 4pm on Sat & Sun. 01274 335100.

#### Settle

**Challenge and Change:** 350 years of the house and region, Folly, daily. 01729 822893.

### SHOWS

#### Doncaster

**Cold War Fest:** Relive the Cold War with displays, documentaries, presentations and events, Aeroventure, Aug 13 & 14, 10am-5pm. [www.aeroventure.org.uk](http://www.aeroventure.org.uk)

### Leeds

**Classic Car Show:** Also stalls, entertainment and raffle in aid of St Gemma's Hospice, Kirkstall Abbey, Aug 13, 11am-3pm. 0113 218 5565, [www.st-gemma.co.uk](http://www.st-gemma.co.uk)

#### Ripley

**Ripley Show:** Loads on offer, from classes to stalls, Ripley Castle Gardens, Aug 14, from 8am. 01943-466654, [www.ripleyshow.co.uk](http://www.ripleyshow.co.uk)

#### Wakefield

**The Second West Yorkshire Classic Car and Bike Show:** Loads of cars on display, trade stands and competitions, Nostell Priory, Aug 14. 01484 667776, [www.classicshows.org](http://www.classicshows.org)

### SPORT

#### Leeds

**The Limelight Dance Studios:** Plenty on offer including the new craze of Zumba, the Limelight. 0113 263 5289, [www.thelimelightleeds.co.uk](http://www.thelimelightleeds.co.uk)

### TALKS

#### Halifax

**Pernicious Pops:** John Luckett speaks, Halifax Bowling Club, Aug 18, 10.15am. 01422 353630. Please note: We make every effort to be accurate, but events are sometimes subject to change. We strongly advise readers to check by phoning the venues listed before travelling to an event.