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Space invaders

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OTTAWA NATIONAL FOREST -- Fast-spreading non-native plants are invading the 1-million acre Ottawa National Forest.

Their seeds and shoots are spread by birds, boats and boots. The aggressive intruders take root and crowd out native wildflowers.

They threaten the diversity and accessibility of the forest, according to Ottawa botanist **Ian Shackleford**.

He described the worst of the invasive plant species Monday morning in a presentation at the Ottawa Visitor Center in Watersmeet. The standing-room crowd of about 80 included lake residents, Ottawa staff and tourists.

Shackleford showed slides and cuttings from plants. Afterward, he led a caravan into the forest west along County 527 to some of the worst infestations where invasive plants have gained a root-hold.

"This keeps me awake at night, worrying about sites we don't know about going to seed," Shackleford said, surveying a stand of garlic mustard at the edge of the forest.

It was not a planned stop, but when Shackleford spotted the garlic mustard, his lead vehicle pulled to the side of the gravel road and others followed suit.

Garlic mustard has a 12-year cycle, dropping hundreds of tiny seeds into the soil to sprout. Three infestations are known in the non-motorized Sylvania wilderness. There are more along the Black River waterfalls trails. And more in backyards and vacant lots in area communities.

"People, vehicles are unintentionally moving garlic mustard into the woods," Shackleford said.

The invasives include ornamental landscape shrubs such as Japanese barberry and exotic honeysuckle, the biennial herb garlic mustard -- the worst invasive plant in the Ottawa, according to Shackleford -- glossy buckthorn, purple loosestrife, four kinds of thistle and more than half a dozen roadside plants.

In lakes, Eurasian water-milfoil is the No. 1 enemy, spread from one lake to another by boats and trailers.

The invasive plants share an ability to thrive in different soils. If their spread is unchecked, they will overrun native plants and reduce the diversity of the forest, according to Shackleford.

Glossy buckthorn, a scrubby shrub that grows more than 12 feet tall, has taken a 1,000-acre patch of forest.

Shackleford described it as an impenetrable thicket.

Battling Invasives

Combating the spread of invasives is labor-intensive.

Tactics range from weed-pulling to chemical and bug warfare.

Crews pull smaller patches of plants such as garlic mustard before they go to seed.

They lop off shoots and apply herbicide from a squeeze bottle to big shrubs such as honeysuckle; no herbicide touches the ground or other plants.

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Ian Shackleford shows Delores Sewell the identifying characteristics of garlic mustard on Monday morning. Shackleford, botanist for the Ottawa National Forest, led a tour of invasive plant sites in the forest. Sewell, a member of the Watersmeet Lake Guards, collected plant samples to show others. (Diane Montz/Daily Globe photo)

"We're not that fond of herbicides on the Ottawa," Shackleford said.

In large patches of Japanese barberry, workers don protective gear and spray the foliage. One of the stops on Shackleford's tour was an infestation of barberry that had been sprayed four days earlier -- the brown and dying shrubs stood out against the lush green of the forest in late spring.

A small beetle helps destroy purple loosestrife. The beetle eats nothing else, Shackleford said.

It prevents the plants from flowering, keeping it in control because it doesn't go to seed.

As the plants decline, so do the beetles.

The caravan stopped at Tenderfoot Creek, where Shackleford pointed out a stand of honeysuckle too tall and thick to tackle.

Instead, he and others waded a few miles upstream last summer looking for scattered bushes at the water's edge to lop and treat with herbicide.

Although Shackleford aims to stop the spread of non-native invasive plants, he notes that the Ottawa covers 1 million acres.

Not far off almost any road, he said, only native plants are seen.

"To have such a weed-free forest is uncommon."

Crossing briefly over paved road at Marenisco, the caravan headed west again on gravel county road through the forest.

Shackleford peered into the woods, then led the group on foot to a thick mat of Japanese barberry, part of a 35-acre infestation.

"This is not a healthy forest," he said, stepping on the solid, spiny knee-high understory.

This summer, Shackleford has a three-person full-time invasive plant crew for the first time.

They're the group that sprayed the barberry, a mile into the forest the previous week. They're certified herbicide applicators equally willing to uproot garlic mustard by hand.

"We could turn the corner on invasive plants this summer," Shackleford said.

--For more information about invasive plants, visit the Ottawa National Forest headquarters in Ironwood or the visitor center at Watersmeet or go online to fs.fed.us/r9/ottawa/. The forest service has brochures with colored photos and detailed descriptions of the invasive plants, laminated pocket-sized ID cards and field guides. To report sightings of invasive plants, call the Ottawa at 906-932-1330.