Green Mountain State WATERS Vermont
Calais Lakes and Ponds WORKING GROUP
SUMMER 2008 Ed. 08-01

# EXOTIC INVASIVES—So What's the Big Deal?

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE** if there are a few new plants or animals in the ponds or shorelines? The tomato didn't originate in Vermont and it hasn't made any difference to our woods and streams. In fact most of our gardens are full of flowers and vegetables that come from far away climes. Yes, there are plenty of weeds in our gardens and many of them aren't natives either. But we have learned to grumble about them, hack at them and pull them out and then have beautiful flowers and bountiful harvests of beans and squash and potatoes. So what is the big deal?The big deal is the word "invasive." What if there was a weed in your vegetable garden that was so vigorous and prolific that you could not get it under control and it overran your vegetables so badly that it stole nearly all of the harvest?

So far this has not happened to people's gardens, but it is happening in the wild gardens where mammals, birds, fish and insects find food and shelter. It is a complex story best told with an illustration. Purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) is an exotic invasive plant native to Europe. It was brought to North America in the early 1800's by immigrants who valued its striking purple flowers and by ships carrying seeds stowed in the ballast water. It is now a serious pest of wetlands and pastures in Vermont and throughout North America.

Once purple loosestrife enters a wetland, it takes over choking out native plants, such as cattails and sedges. The loss of these natives has dire effects on the wildlife that depends on them. Purple loosestrife has little value as food for animals and colonies of the plant become so thick that they cannot serve as cover for wildlife. From the point of view of the creatures who dwell in the wetlands, loosestrife steals their food and takes away their homes. They must move out or perish.

By comparison life in a cattail marsh is rich and densely interwoven. Roots, shoots and seeds sustain plant eating animals, which become meals for the carnivores in the food chain. Stalks, leaves and cattail seed fluff provide nesting and den building materials. For some creatures cattails provide one stop shopping. All year long muskrats gnaw on cattail roots and live in lodges built from cattail leaves and stalks.

At the end of winter when green plants are scarce moose browse the marshes and pond edges to dine on dried cattail leaves. In spring, as the ice is just going out of the ponds, male red-winged blackbirds return to their posts atop cattail stalks, flashing their red epaulets and calling to defend their breeding territory. At the same time insects are beginning to hatch and the blackbirds switch their diets from plants to insects. Females need a lot of bugs to provide the protein and calcium necessary to lay eggs. Once a pair of redwings has mated, the birds gather reeds and cattail leaves to build a cup-shaped nest.

A cattail wetland is home to many birds. Marsh wrens make nests of cattail leaves and soft fluff that they weave around a cattail stalk. The least bittern makes its nest amongst cattails close to fish, frogs, tadpoles, salamanders and water insects that are food for its young. Ducks and geese feed on cattail seed.

Lots of insects live in the watery neighborhood of a stand of cattails. So do the animals that catch them, such as bullfrogs. In summer, a cattail marsh is full of dragonflies. Dragonfly nymphs hatch in the water and live there until they are ready to become flying adults. Then they crawl up a cattail stalk, shed their skin and fly away.

When a cattail marsh is overridden with purple loosestrife this abundance of live is lost. It is not just loosestrife, but exotic invasives in general. They have a catastrophic effect on the wild realms when they move in and replace the native plants and animals. We are all losers. Game becomes less plentiful for hunters, fish and bird populations decrease to the distress of fisherman and birdwatchers. Everyone who loves to hear and see the wonders of nature are left with an impoverished neighborhood when invasives reshape the landscape. And that's the big deal!

## Protect your Pond from Exotic Invasives

*Early detection* is vital to protecting Vermont's waterbodies from harmful invasive plants and animals. Vermont Invasive Patrollers (VIPs) monitor a local lake or pond for new introductions of invasive species while also learning about native aquatic plants and animals and their habitats.

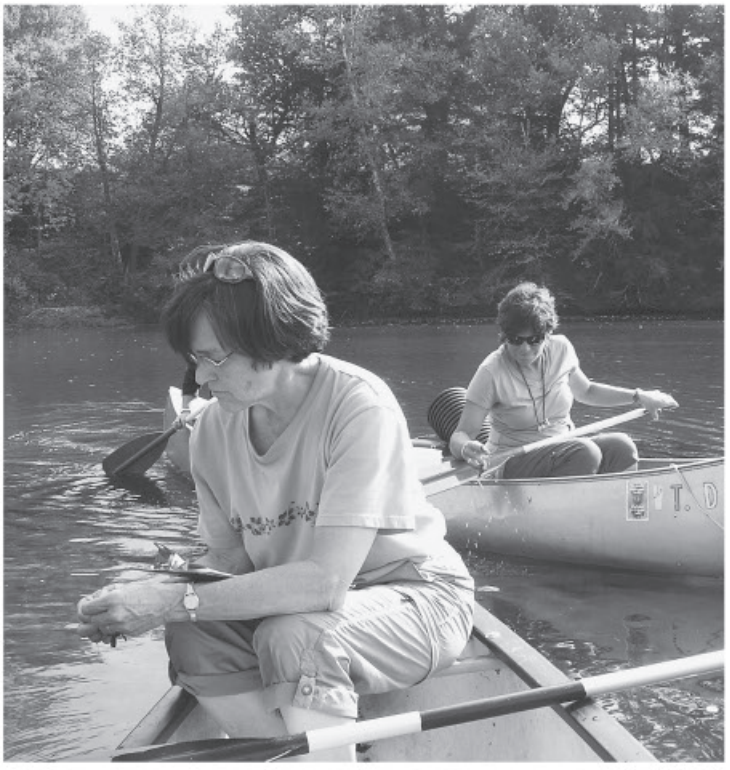
### A VIP training workshop takes about four hours and consists of:

- A two-hour indoor session of a slide show and a hands-on introduction to native and invasive plant and animal identification,
- A two-hour filed session *on the water,* during which participants will learn how to conduct surveys of native and invasive species.

### It is helpful if VIP workshop hosts can provide:

- In indoor site with electricity, such as a town hall or library,
- A nearby lake or pond where canoes can be launched,
- Canoes and/or kayaks with life jackets.

To schedule a workshop, contact Leslie Matthews at leslie.matthews@state.vt.us or call 802-241-3777.



Maple Corner Potluck
10 August 2008

## "Nature's Calling"

Ray Richer and his wife Evelyn live on Joe's Pond. He is a self-taught wildlife photographer who has been doing nature photography for almost 30 years. They have spent many hours watching the wildlife that lives in the woody and wetland buffer along their shoreline. Together they have collaborated in documenting some of the wonders that they have seen. Recently Ray brought their presentation to the 2008 New England Lakes Conference held in June at Fairlee, Vermont. It was a tremendous hit! The world along an undeveloped edge of a pond just teams with life! Come see their incredible photographs and hear their story. It is inspirational! Enriching our shorelines with more native plants that host these fascinating creatures becomes irresistible. The presentation will follow a potluck dinner at the Maple Corner Community Center on Sunday, 10 August 2008. The dinner begins at 6:30. The presentation follows at ~7:30. Everyone is welcome! The event is free.

# REMOVING NATIVE AQUATIC PLANTS—What's Allowed, What's Not

**SOMETIMES AS YOU SIT ON THE PORCH** or the dock you look in the water and mutter about the growing mass of water lilies or the submerged plants that keep getting tangled around your legs when you try to swim. These plants are native to the pond and are essential to the wildlife that lives there. They provide the habitat where fish spawn, where baby fish seek protection from predators, where insects, the diet of many birds, lay their eggs and hatch new generations of dragonflies, water sliders, and yes, mosquitoes and blackflies. But, you say, enough is enough! You just want a small area of the water where it is easy to launch a boat or go swimming.

Vermont state regulations permit shoreline property owners to remove aquatic plants from their property if they *pull them by hand* and if they *remove the uprooted plants from the pond.* This means that if you want to go into the water with a rake or shovel and dig up unwanted plants and then haul them to shore, it is allowed. In fact, these plants are great additions to your compost pile. But you are not allowed to use machinery to harvest these plants. Nor are you allowed to pull up large quantities of plants and dump them at some other location in the pond, where they will decompose and make an unsightly and odiferous mat that can turn into a massive new colonization of the unwanted plants.

When you look at those unwanted plants remember that there are many other creatures that call them home, such as the fish fry that will ultimately grow and provide great pleasure to fishermen. Also, the birds, which most of us delight in watching, feed on the prolific numbers of insects who reside in the aquatic plants. With that in mind you might want to confine your plant removal to an area that is just large enough for your use as a boater or swimmer.

Example of cleared swimming and boating channel.

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For volunteering or further information, contact:
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