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INSECT WARRIORS ATTACK *PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE* THREAT TO NATURAL VEGETATION

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Lake of the Woods Enterprise

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Its colourful blooms may look spectacular, but *purple loosestrife*, an invasive species of noxious weed to North America, is one that can be deadly to natural vegetation, especially in wetland habitats.

"It's an attractive plant, but once it gets established, the snowball effect starts," said Norm Hissa, senior fish and wildlife technician for the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Hissa said although *purple loosestrife* is in the Kenora area, it is very sparse with much larger concentrations of the weed in eastern and southern Ontario.

"I haven't seen a lot of it locally, but it's here," said Hissa.

According to both the MNR and the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH), who have partnered together to form the Invasive Species Awareness Program, *purple loosestrife* has been known to grow in marshes, riverbanks and even low lying farm fields since its introduction to Canada from Europe in the 1800s. As the weed spreads and crowds out naturally existing habitats, fewer species of plants and animals are able to thrive.

As a result of the weed's rapid spread in many areas of Canada, several provinces, including Ontario and Manitoba, have been experimenting with the introduction of populations of Galerucella beetles from Europe which feed only on the leaves of the plant and beat down the purple weed enough to save native species from being overrun.

Heading the beetle project in Ontario is the OFAH and according to OFAH invasive species biologist Francine MacDonald, the *purple loosestrife* problem in the province is very serious.

"It was necessary to bring the beetles in because (purple loosestrife) hasn't had any natural controls," said MacDonald. "Volunteers in every community across the province are encouraged to take part in efforts to help control (the plant)."

MacDonald said the beetle release in Ontario was well researched and has a history of success. To date, there have been more than 300 successful beetle releases in the province since 2003.

"It is one of the most successful examples of biological control in North America," said MacDonald. "The beetles can reduce up to 80 to 90 per cent of purple loosestrife. From egg to adult they survive entirely on (the plant)."

Hissa said because of the small concentrations of purple loosestrife in the Kenora-area, the MNR has no plans to use beetles to combat the weed here. He said they are currently focusing on public education to stop its spread.

"We're not doing any eradicating here locally because its not a big issue," said Hissa.

In Manitoba, it's Purple Loosestrife Project, which includes several government agencies as well as Ducks Unlimited Canada, has also been using beetles to combat the weed for several years throughout the

province including Whiteshell Provincial Park.

Cory Lindgren, from Ducks Unlimited and who is also the purple loosestrife biocontrol coordinator for the project, said they have been releasing as many beetles as they can in infested areas and thus far, the beetles have been working "extremely well".

"With some sites, within three or four years, we are almost totally eradicating the loosestrife," said Lindgren.

Lindgren said when he visited the Kenora-area two weeks ago he was surprised that he didn't see any purple loosestrife, but added that this doesn't mean there couldn't be an explosion of the weed in the future.

"That's always kind of the cryptic nature of any invasive species," said Lindgren.

He said 20-30 plants could "pop up" in an area and remain stable for five to six years before they explode and turn into a "couple thousand".

"When you have those small numbers of plants, that's the time you have to be out there controlling it," said Lindgren.

He said in Manitoba there are several concentrated areas of purple loosestrife where there are "tens of thousands" of plants in marsh areas, like the Netley-Libau Marsh in the south basin of Lake Winnipeg where the beetles have been released.

In addition, Lindgren said the program is currently investigating an infestation of purple loosestrife right on the Manitoba-Ontario border at Shoal Lake. He said the weed appears to have spread along the rail line from Winnipeg to the Indian Bay area of Shoal Lake and they are planning to fly over the area this week to assess how much is there.

"We could end up throwing beetles into there next year," said

Lindgren._