Original

Ragwort - love it, don't destroy it

Ragwort is a plant that divides opinion, but from an insect perspective it is an essential part of our flora.

Ragwort is a plant that supports a high level of biodiversity, at least 30 species of insect and 14 species of fungi are specialists on the plant - they feed on it and cannot survive without it. The most famous ragwort dependant animal is the Cinnabar moth (Tyria jacobaeae) but there are also several beetles, a hoverfly, midges, an aphid, a thrip, a mite and various other flies and micro-moths that also rely on the plant. More on specialist fauna of ragwort here - https://cdn.buglife.org.uk/downloads/Ragwort-Insect-Fauna-in-detail_1.pdf

Ragwort is also an important nectar and pollen source for many pollinating animals, it occurs along road verges and paths, thus providing refuelling stops for insects between their suitable breeding habitats. It is of extra importance to pollinator populations as it flowers at a time of year when other nectar sources can be scarce - e.g. on heathland where it flowers after the spring flowers finish, but before the heather blooms, providing crucial food for bees and other insects during that gap.

Studies in Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK show that insect biomass and abundance has declined very steeply in recent decades. Much of this loss is associated with the loss of wildflowers, the fragmentation of habitats and the buffeting of the ecosystems by climate change. Ragwort as a still frequent wildflower has an important role in reducing the loss of both insect species and the decline in general animal abundance.

Ragwort is one of many species of plants that contain toxic chemicals to prevent them being eaten by herbivores, this is very successful, ragwort is avoided by generalist grazers, although sheep seem robustly tolerant to it and of course the toxicity benefits the specialist insects as it keeps them free from the competition of generalist nibblers, for whom ragwort is very unpalatable.

It was once believed in the UK that Ragwort was responsible for thousands of deaths of horses every year, but improved knowledge about the diagnosis of ragwort poisoning means that people are now aware that simply showing signs of liver failure and illness are not diagnostic of ragwort poisoning. Most cases of horse or livestock death thought to be due to ragwort poisoning, on dissection turn out to be caused by other factors. Furthermore, while dissection of the liver can rule out most suspected cases, it is not diagnostic as the same pathology can appear due to damage to the liver from other plant material, and particularly from aflatoxins in mould growing on feed, silage or hay. This last cause is thought to be a growing problem for horse welfare, but may be being masked by the mistaken attribution of aflatoxin poisoning to ragwort. Caution needs to be applied when concluding that a death is the result of eating ragwort. Horses and cows have to eat quite a large

amount of ragwort to suffer fatal poisoning, so cases where there is no evidence of significant contact between the animal and ragwort are unlikely to be due ragwort poisoning.

Ragwort is an important part of our native fauna, the fears about its harmfulness to horses and cattle have resulted in much misinformation, actual confirmed death and sickness is very rare and almost always the result of criminally bad animal welfare standards or contaminated hay - issues best addressed by law enforcement, not wildlife persecution. Hopefully the people of Europe can continue to find a place for this golden flower and its inhabitants in their hearts and lands.

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