

Monster plant

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Since it's not a native plant to North America, it has no natural enemies to impede its spread, the OFAH release indicates.

Neither the plant's seeds, roots, stems or leaves provide food or shelter. Instead, the woody-stemmed plant displaces the area's native plants which do provide sustenance and cover.

"Purple loosestrife thrives two feet into and out of the water which is a critical area for fish and wildlife," said Mr. Hopper. "The native plants in this zone provide food, cover, nesting habitat, brood rearing habitat, spawning and nursery habitat."

"Bob Morris, a biologist for the Credit Valley Conservation Authority (CVCA) has seen how the displacement of natural vegetation by purple loosestrife such as cattails, bullrushes, burreed and arrowhead (emergent marsh plants) is affecting wildlife species such as the Redwing Blackbird.

"The Redwing Blackbird nests in cattails by weaving the cattail reeds into a nest. The hardy stem of the plant supports the weight of the birds and the nest," he said.

"In some areas where the cattails have been squeezed out, the birds have tried to nest in the loosestrife but the plants just fall over."

The only class of wildlife that seems to utilize the plant are insects which feed on the blooming flower's nectar.

"Insects take advantage of the plant but that can't be considered a benefit because those insects can do quite well on the native flowering vegetation," said Mr. Hooper.

What's worse is that the plant is virtually impossible to destroy save for massive spraying of herbicide which, when used, would destroy the natural vegetation along with the purple loosestrife. Spot spraying can be done, but due to immense mass of plants, is unfeasible, said Mr. Hooper.

Cutting and pulling the plant is also useless because the loosestrife's incredibly strong roots simply fragment and sprout thicker clumps of new plants.

Even if a plant is pulled, roots intact, it can't be thrown onto the ground to die because it will sprout nodules which will root themselves into the ground to sprout more plants, he explained.

Once purple loosestrife starts blooming in mid-summer, it produces millions of seeds (each plant can produce 2.7 million seeds) which can lie dormant in the mud and sprout under ideal conditions years later, said Mr. Hooper.

The only effective control would be the introduction of the plant's natural insect and disease enemies which are maintaining the plant's spread in Europe. But research into the feasibility of controls has only just begun in the United States and could take decades before scientists find something that won't further threaten our native wildlife, said Mr. Hooper.

All the Ministry's efforts are now being focused on educating the public to ensure they don't unwittingly contribute to the spread of purple loosestrife.

Astonishingly, few people realize the plant's threat and carefully cultivate the blossoms in their own gardens, said Mr. Morris.

Maybe the blame should be laid on the Ministry of Agriculture and Food which is responsible for listing threatening plants as noxious weeds to make the sale of them illegal. So far, purple loosestrife hasn't been classified as a noxious weed despite urging from environmental organiza-

tions such as Ducks Unlimited and O.F.A.H.

It doesn't help that most nurseries sell purple loosestrife as a garden perennial.

All the nurseries listed in the yellow pages for Halton Hills - Willowcreek, Birchway Farm, Tuitman's and Sheridan Nurseries - admit they either sell the plant or have no knowledge of

the effect it has on Ontario's wetlands.

A nursery owner said he has several plants in stock because it is a popular seller.

Another said now that if she knew about purple loosestrife, she would stop selling it. She's angry that nursery trade magazines haven't carried any articles warning nursery owners.



Sharon Zmija of Glen Williams looks out over the Credit River everyday from Preston's Grocery and Meats where she works but she, like many people, never realized the purple loosestrife invading the river is anything other than a pretty plant.

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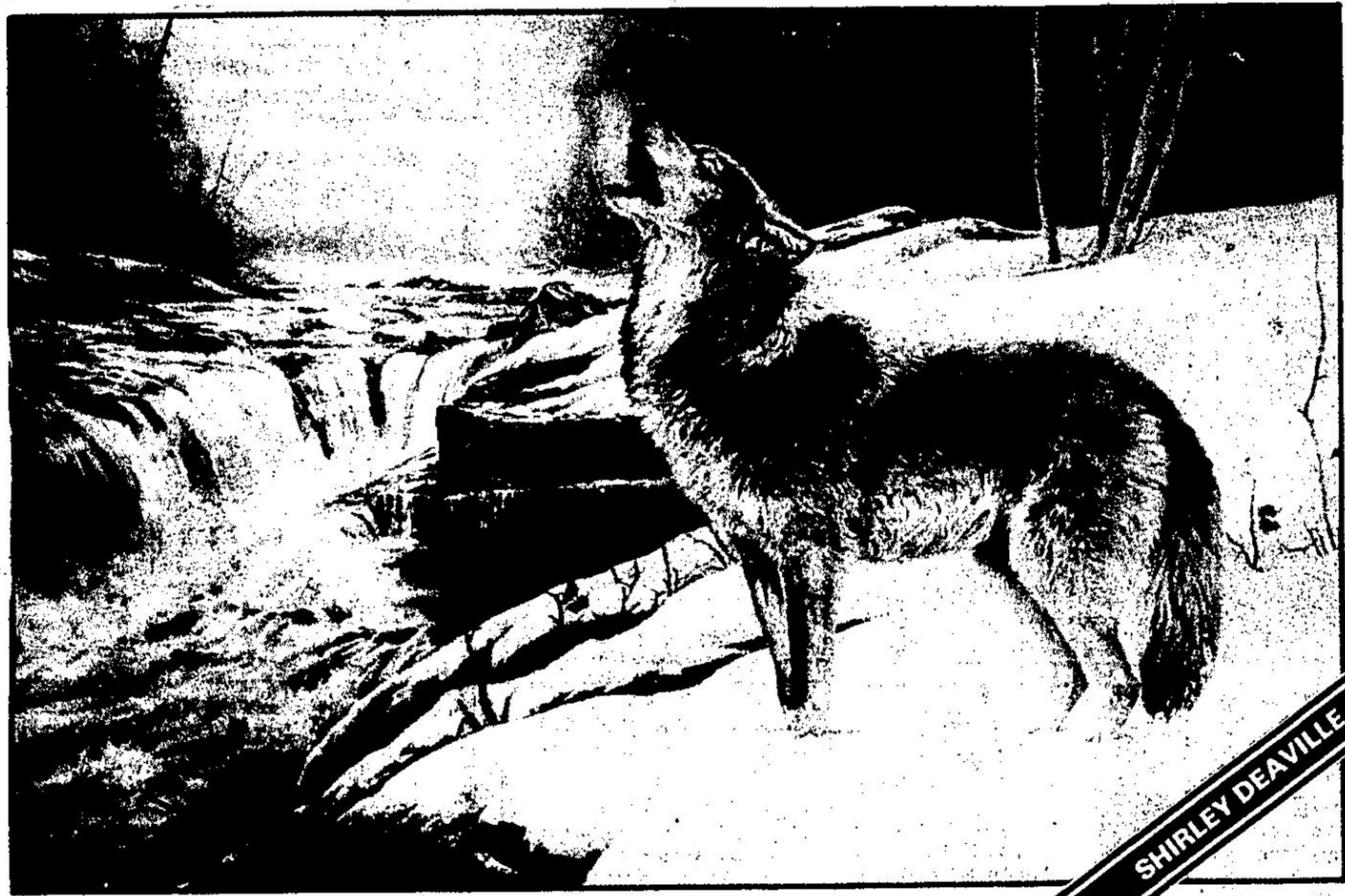
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