

NEWS RELEASE – WEED OF THE WEEK SERIES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

8 NOVEMBER 2006

Bird Seed may be Contaminated with Weed Seeds

Now that our migratory feathered friends have headed for warmer climates to our south, many landowners are filling bird feeders to provide a helping hand to those species that reside in our region for the duration of the winter. At this time of year, many bird species gather into large flocks, roving widely in search of food. Most of these will congregate readily around feeders that can be placed near a convenient window where the birds can be seen continuously, closely, and comfortably observed. What does this have to do with invasive plants you ask? Well as it turns out, some of the mixed birdseed packages may be harbouring seeds of invasive plants.

Mixed seed is commonly marketed as “wild bird seed”, “wild bird mix”, “finch mix” and so on. There are no regulations about any of these mixes. Seed houses and retailers mix their own and they may not declare the contents on the package. Buying the components separately and mixing them yourself is the only way of being absolutely sure of what you are scooping into your feeders. If you happen to live near a feed manufacturer or seed cleaning plant, you may be able to purchase very inexpensive bird fodder referred to as “screenings”. I strongly discourage anyone from buying birdseed in this form, as these mixes contain weed seeds, damaged and undersized grain kernels, dust and other debris separated from grain during the cleaning process.

During this past summer, I was contacted by a landowner who discovered an unrecognizable plant near her bird feeder. I identified the plant as buffalobur (*Solanum rostrum*), a plant that is a native of the Great Plains. The stems, leaves and even flowers of buffalobur sport many sharp spines. This drought tolerant annual grows to 0.6 metres (2 feet) in height. While it can be found in meadows, dry rangeland, pastures, lawns, cultivated fields, roadsides and waste areas, it prefers disturbed, dry areas. In my ten years of dealing with weeds, I have only seen this plant on two previous occasions. However this year I came across this weed in four different locations of the Okanagan, always directly under or in close proximity to a bird feeder. A quick Google search reveals that buffalobur is indeed a common contaminant of birdseed. While it is fortunate that buffalobur is not very competitive, it got me wondering about the potential spread of more invasive species via birdseed.

A press release issued earlier this year by the Department of Agriculture in the State of Idaho indicated that this agency had ordered two dozen companies in the US to stop the sale of bird and other animal feeds that contain viable noxious weed seeds. Over a period of several months, the department sampled 92 feeds from 34 manufacturers. Lab tests concluded that 54 of the 92 seed-type feed samples contained viable noxious weed seeds, including buffalobur, jointed goatgrass, field bindweed, johnsongrass, Canada thistle and hoary cress. Most of the products containing the noxious weed seed were domestic or wild bird feed mixes, but some were also feeds for hamsters, gerbils and squirrels.

So if you do chose to feed the birds this winter, or at any time of year, please follow these simple precautions. Carefully select the seed mix, or better yet, create the mix yourself. Remove any unusual plants growing under or near your bird feeder, before the plant goes to seed. Prevention truly is the least expensive and often the most practical method for controlling invasive plants.

For more information on invasive plants, contact Lisa Scott, Weed Coordinator for the Okanagan-Similkameen Regional District at (250) 492-0237 or email info@rdos.bc.ca
