

IMA Update 2021

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

2021 was a banner year for the [Invasive Management Area \(IMA\)](#) efforts within the Royal Lake watershed! Briefly, IMA is a habitat restoration program overseen by the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) where trained volunteer site leaders head workdays to remove specific invasive plants and add natives as needed. All of this work is accomplished through FCPA permits on FCPA land using hand tools; only FCPA staff and contractors may apply herbicides and operate power tools. The [Royal Lake system](#) benefits from currently having seven site leaders. Some work is conspicuous in scope and location while other operations are off-trail in remote parts or targets small patches. Since the site leaders collaborate, this article is an overview of the activity instead of crediting individual leaders. The primary strategy employed throughout the parks is to stop the spread of invasive plants especially at places where they produce copious amounts of seed that can transfer elsewhere.



Figure 1. ICS volunteers use Weed Wrenches to extract invasive shrubs with roots intact. These efficient tools cause minimal soil disturbance. Photo by Greg Sykes.

The ground remained thawed during most of the warm winter. Returning to monitor previously worked sites, the soft soil aided volunteers in removing roots and seedlings of IMA targets like [Amur honeysuckle \(*Lonicera maackii*\)](#), [multiflora rose \(*Rosa multiflora*\)](#), and [porcelain-berry \(*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*\)](#) that were missed earlier. These patrols throughout the year help keep the weeds at bay while encouraging native plants to repopulate. Monitoring includes checks on various park sites and habitats to assess the health, look for invasive species, and observe the recovery of restored sections.

Spring saw the return of [garlic mustard \(*Alliaria petiolata*\)](#) season. This biennial of the mustard family has white flowers blooming atop stalks that reach up to four feet. Its seeds can last 8-10 years in the soil before germinating, so yearly pulls are the key to controlling this weed. Expanses with years of previous work had much less garlic mustard than newly opened plots. To cover territory efficiently, site leaders hosted many workdays in divided zones around the lake, Shanes Creek, and parkland below Commonwealth Boulevard. There were some workdays attacking the garlic mustard in Rolling Woods Estates Park, a three-acre park surrounded by houses but still falls within the Royal Lake watershed. All of these efforts resulted in a broader assault on this weed than ever before!

Summer actions around Royal Lake included continued work by the western loop (near the Glen Cove I townhouses), where the predominant targets are porcelain-berry, [Himalayan blackberry \(*Rubus armeniacus*\)](#), multiflora rose, and Amur honeysuckle. Massive eradication of porcelain-berry and Amur honeysuckle occurred between the Chatsworth Court entrance and the dam (next to Lakepointe). The stumps were left in the ground, marked with paint, and FCPA staff will soon treat these remnants with herbicide. This approach is necessary here because the slope is steep and removing the roots before natives can grow back would expose the soil to erosion. The main Lakeside Park entrance and surrounding area enjoyed a huge purge from invasive weeds. The IMA targets here include all of those previously discussed plus [Chinese privet \(*Ligustrum sinense*\)](#), [wax-leaf privet \(*L. japonicum*\)](#), [English ivy \(*Hedera helix*\)](#), [oriental bittersweet \(*Celastrus orbiculatus*\)](#), [Bradford pear \(aka Callery pear, *Pyrus calleryana*\)](#), [winged burning bush \(*Euonymus alatus*\)](#), [Japanese holly \(*Ilex crenata*\)](#), and [leatherleaf Mahonia \(*Berberis bealei*\)](#).

IMA relies on volunteers, ranging from students requiring service hours to organizations out to help the planet. IMA at Royal Lake benefited this year from [The Lamb Center](#) (a daytime facility that helps homeless people) paying multiple visits to pull weeds and add native restoration plants. In October, the [Immanuel Christian School \(ICS\)](#) had a group of students and adults apply their “service” motto to remove many different invasive weeds near a storm drain outfall, where seeds washed in and took root. Days later, Kiefer Haradon earned his Eagle Scout rank by leading a day-long session near the Lakeside Park parking lot, tossing weeds such as Bradford pears, Himalayan blackberry, Chinese privet, and white mulberry (*Morus alba*) into a roll-on dumpster.



Figure 2. The AmeriCorps volunteers load a dumpster with Bradford pears, exactly where all of these trash trees in the U.S. belong! Photo by MaryAnne Boyer.

IMA activity expanded into Rabbit Branch Park. A swim club was here before closing and the property turning over to FCPA in 2013. That restoration process included adding a native meadow and reforestation. However, mature Bradford pears remained on the plot, are cultivated across the street, and pervade neighboring Kings Park West Community Association land. The call for an IMA site leader to help nurture this park from the start went unanswered. As a result, scores of fast-growing Bradford pears and other invasive weeds invaded the area, began squeezing out the restoration plantings, and matured to start spewing seeds of their own! Local volunteers and an [AmeriCorps](#) team cut and piled those fruit-laden trees into both a roll-on dumpster and an additional 56 bags, all destined for incineration since the seeds might survive composting. With a deep tap root, the stumps were too difficult to pull so they were marked for contractors to apply herbicides. Pressure on invasive weeds is effective. Like Rabbit Branch Park, a Royal Lake Park site between the Dundalk Street trailhead and the nearby “Grassy Knoll” entrance at Gainsborough Drive also is close to a Bradford pear infestation, this one lining half of Claridge Court. Whereas no IMA activity controlled the Bradford pears at Rabbit Branch Park for many years, these weeds never became as big of a problem at this Royal Lake Park site thanks to IMA volunteers eliminating the scores of saplings from parkland.



Figure 3. Bradford pears at Rabbit Branch Park grew beyond a healthy density for any tree species. Compared to a wooded environment, they developed much faster in this exposed space, thereby outpacing the native species planted here. Now stumps, paint marks the pears for follow-up herbicide treatment. Opening this area enables the native oaks (left), black willows, and other plants to flourish. Photo by Greg Sykes.

Local residents sometimes report invasive plants, usually growing in natural areas close to their yards. However, some of these sites are outside of FCPA property and IMA’s jurisdiction. All of the homeowner association (HOA) properties in the Royal Lake watershed, including Kings Park West Community Association, West Park Community Association, Martins Reserve Point HOA, Glen Cove HOA, and Waverlee Woods HOA, have some nasty invasive weeds while also possessing good native habitat that is worth saving. To remove these particular weeds, the justifiably concerned HOA members should first call their respective HOAs into action. After all, healthy land stewardship benefits everyone. Alternatively, residents can seek permission to remove these target weeds themselves or through a licensed contractor.

Individuals or entities wishing to eradicate invasive species need to first know the best methods since applying the wrong ones can have undesired consequences such as collateral damage or even spreading the weed even more. Anyone interested in setting up a program modeled after IMA to work **outside of FCPA** and **with the landowner's permission** is welcome to contact me at greg@grsykes.com. We can talk about targets, tools, techniques, logistics, commitments, and training. When people passing by chatted during a workday, some admitted cultivating IMA targets on their property but planned to replace them with natives as the plants died. Unfortunately, those weeds spewing seeds into the environment are doing far more damage season after season than the single specimen is on that plot! Best course: act now and replace those species with native alternatives. As seen here, there are many ways people can help the effort to stop the spread of invasive plants.

Rabbit Branch Park still needs an IMA site leader, which is fun, educational, and rewarding. If you are interested, contact the FCPA IMA supervisors, Patricia Pearl Greenberg (Patricia.Greenberg@fairfax-county.gov) and Gloria Medina (Gloria.Medina@fairfaxcounty.gov). Have another FCPA plot where you would like to be an IMA site leader? Let them know about it, too!

* * * * *