

BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR THIS WOODLAND INVADER

In the spring of last year, many of us at ONAPA (Ohio Natural Areas & Preserves Association) were surprised to see a new invasive species make what seemed to be its first appearance within the forested wetlands of Fowler Woods State Nature Preserve in Richland County. This new invader was yellowtop, also known as butterweed (*Packera glabella*), formally known as *Senecio gabellus*, one of many species of ragworts. The genus name honors Canadian botanist John G. Packer who, between 1958 and 1988, was an instructor at the University of Alberta and worked extensively on the flora of Alberta. The specific epithet *glabella* comes from the Latin *glaber* meaning “smooth or hairless,” in reference to this plant’s smooth virtually hairless, succulent stem. The distinctive hollow stem of this annual flower stands about 1-3 foot tall and is topped with a cluster of very bright, showy yellow flowers, hence the common names “yellowtop” and “butterweed.” The alternating pinnatifid stem leaves with deeply cut rounded lobes and teeth, the bright yellow ray and disk flowers, and especially the fleshy hollow unbranched single stem, all make this species very easy to identify when flowering. Winter rosettes can be a little more challenging to identify.

Not all invasives are alien or non-native. Butterweed is a good example of a native species that is expanding its range and is very invasive. It is native to central and southeastern North America. It ranges from east Texas to Florida northward up the Mississippi River Valley drainage, now into Ohio and southern Michigan. It appears to still be rapidly expanding its range northward. According to the *Seventh Catalog of the Vascular Plants of Ohio* by Tom S. Cooperrider, Allison W. Cusick and John T. Kartesz, butterweed is naturalized in Ohio, which means it is a plant from outside of the state, but now thoroughly established in Ohio and being able to reproduce and spread on its own. Butterweed’s appearance in Ohio started out slowly as it became established in southwestern Ohio many years ago. However, within the last 15 to 20 years, populations have exploded across the state. As the populations exploded, butterweed made its presences known to all by first blanketing no-till agriculture fields in huge acreages of bright yellow flowers stretching almost as far as the eye can see. The bare unplowed agricultural fields provided an ideal nurse bed for multitudes of extremely viable wind dispersed seeds. Butterweed is a winter annual which turns extensive agriculture fields into strikingly beautiful blankets of yellow flowers in early spring before fields are plowed and planted. Typically these fields aren’t plowed and prepared for spring planting until after butterweed has dispersed vast quantities of its seeds across the landscape continuing its range expansion.

At first butterweed growing in Ohio seemed to only invade no-till agricultural fields, but eventually it started showing up elsewhere. Throughout its normal southern range, butterweed is found growing on just about any low, wet ground including wet woods, along streams, and along roadside ditches, in addition to moist to wet bare agricultural fields. Now well established in Ohio, butterweed colonies are showing up anywhere it can seed into low wet ground throughout our state, including ephemeral pools in Fowler Woods State Nature Preserve and

Collier State Nature Preserve, for example. The problem is that butterweed produces massive quantities of seeds with very high germination rates, so high that it produces a dense ground cover and extensive colonies that crowd out and shade out rarer native wetland species such as golden saxifrage (*Chrysosplenium americanum*), swamp saxifrage (*Saxifraga pennsylvanica*), yellow water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus flabellaris*) and cardinal-flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) at Fowler Woods. Efforts will continue to keep this invasive species from taking over the wetlands within Fowler Woods, but it may prove to be an uphill battle. Nevertheless, it is a battle well worth the effort in the fight to preserve natural diversity in our state. Be on the lookout for this plant as it continues its invasion into Ohio's natural areas!

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