

Pretty Purple Loosestrife Threatens Moab.

By the Grand county Weed Board.

A noxious weed that grows so tall and thick in some wetlands waterfowl can't land on the water, much less see it, is expected to arrive near Moab and there's not much anybody can do about the weed.

Purple loosestrife, a perennial herb brought in the United States in the early 1800s as a flowering ornamental plant. Is reported growing along the Colorado River in Colorado.

That means it's probably only a matter of time before purple loosestrife seeds find their way down the Colorado River to the Nature Conservancy's 900 acre Scott M. Matheson Wetlands preserve outside Moab.

Purple loosestrife can grow 6-8 feet high.

"To this date we don't have purple loosestrife, although we expect it since it's upstream," says Sue Bellagamba of The Nature Conservancy project office in Moab.

"I understand it's been found in Mesa County, Colo. My hope is that we'll get on it really fast when it appears, so that it won't be a problem."

Infestations of purple loosestrife are prevented if the few plants that could be the beginning of an infestation are found before they spread their seeds. Herbicides applied properly can kill the plant while posing minimal risk to other plants and wildlife.

Purple loosestrife could arrive with perennial pepperweed, which is another invasive plant that ruins wetlands, though perennial pepperweed hasn't been sighted here yet.

"There's a tremendous amount of perennial pepperweed upstream," says Dr. Steven Dewey, extension weed specialist at Utah State University.

Native to southern Europe and western Asia, perennial pepperweed thrives in wet areas where it crowds out native vegetation. Infestation of purple loosestrife and perennial pepperweed can clear an area of wildlife, Dewey said. "they just leave. The wildlife numbers go way down," Dewey said. "It (the weed) crowds out the plants that wildlife rely on either for nesting or for food or cover, and replaces those essential plants with these two weeds that the wildlife can't utilize either for food or cover."

Steve Budlier, vegetation manager for the National Park Service in southeast Utah, says he worries purple loosestrife seeds will take root along the Colorado River in Grand County where people are unlikely to see it.

"If the stuff comes down the river, it could be growing for a while and nobody would notice it until it spreads," Budlier said.

The Bureau of Land Management office in Moab is on a purple loosestrife alert for the weed's appearance where the Colorado River goes through BLM land in Grand County.

"It spreads fast and it's got the water course to spread it, so once it gets started, it keeps going down the river," said Daryl Trotter of the BLM office in Moab.

Purple loosestrife already has consumed wetlands about 20 miles south of Price, wiping out what was once prime habitat for waterfowl. Leroy Mead, a Utah Division of Wildlife Resources habitat biologist, says the infested wetlands no longer are of any use to birds.

"They don't even know it's there," Mead said of the purple loosestrife growing so thick that waterfowl can't see the water. "It crowds out all availability to water."

Although nobody knows when or how purple loosestrife arrived south of Price, Mead

said he's heard stories the weed, with its rose-purple flowers, was planted for honeybees.

"It's a very pretty plant, but it gets so thick that a human can't walk through it," Mead said. "It looks like Moab has a lot of habitat that it likes"

If the first purple loosestrife plants to arrive in Grand County go unnoticed and become an infestation— but not a huge infestation— spread of the plant still might be controlled by exposing it to exotic insects, says Grand County Weed Board member Gary Wilson.

Successful biological control of weeds or exposing them to bugs from the same countries the weeds came from that eat the plants, depend on many factors, including the size of the weed infestations the bugs are attacking.

"It works to a degree if you get it before it gets out of control," Wilson said.

Although about half the states, including Utah, list purple loosestrife as a noxious weed and prohibit the plant's sale and distribution, some nurseries still sell it as an ornamental plant. Purple loosestrife is known to grow wild in at least 42 states.

About seven years ago purple loosestrife was found growing in city planters in Logan, said Ira Brickford, roadside vegetation manager for Utah Department of Transportation.