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Monday, June 12, 2006

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OUTDOORS

Bugs bottle up Scotch broom

Worker collects local insects for weed control



Sarah Galbraith The Bellingham Herald

Laurel Baldwin, Whatcom County's noxious weeds coordinator, beats a Scotch broom bush with a racket to shake out any Scotch broom seed beetles on Thursday in Custer.

**FIONA COHEN
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD**

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Standing under a power line near Custer, Jennifer Andreas takes a badminton racket and pummels a broom branch over a square frame of canvas.

Then she looks at what comes out. Among the yellow flower petals and delicate green insects are dark specks: beetles.

If one of these beetles decided to wander over this newspaper, its

oval black body could barely cover one letter at a time.

But these tiny insects could succeed where muscles and chemicals have failed. They could limit the spread of Scotch broom.

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Scotch broom got its start in North

America as an ornamental plant, and as a way of stabilizing roadsides. It spreads rapidly into open areas, choking meadows with brush. Its yellow flowers turn into seedpods that crack open in the heat of summer, catapulting the seeds away from the plant, where they travel around courtesy of boots, car tires, ants and birds.

A mature plant can have more than 2,000 seedpods, each with as many as nine seeds per pod. The seeds can stay in soil for 60 years and still germinate. It's a system that allowed Scotch broom to spread over meadows from southwest British Columbia to San Francisco.

That's where the beetles, whose species are *Bruchidius villosus* and *Exapion fuscirostre*, come in. These beetles lay eggs in Scotch broom seedpods. The larvae grow inside, dining on the seeds, so that when the seedpod bursts open, beetles bounce out, not seeds.

Since the late 1990s, weed control officials have been releasing the insects along the coast. But no one needed to introduce them in Whatcom County. They arrived here on their own.

Exapion fuscirostre has been here for years. It reduces Scotch broom seed production by 60 percent. Andreas spotted *Bruchidius villosus* this year. It can burrow and chew through 90 percent of the seeds.

Together, they're bound to have a big impact, Andreas said.

They don't damage the adult broom plants, but can slow their spread, said Andreas, who coordinates the Westside Weed Biocontrol Program for Washington State University Cooperative Extension.

"Even though it doesn't eradicate the weed," Andreas said, "it brings it down to manageable levels."

BEETLE EXPRESS

Other weeds also have insect enemies. Weed control officials delivered some, such as a beetle that dines on purple loosestrife. Others, such as a moth whose caterpillars gobble up tansy ragwort, showed up on their own, said Laurel Baldwin, Whatcom County's noxious weeds coordinator.

On Thursday, Andreas released 400 *Larinus minutus* beetles and 200 *Bangasternus fausti* beetles on some spotted knapweed on the

shoreline of Birch Bay State Park.

Andreas acts as an express service for weed-eating insects. She collects them by the hundreds in Oregon, Idaho and Eastern Washington and delivers them to weeds in 19 counties in Western Washington.

She stores the insects in cylindrical cardboard containers in the fridge of her Gig Harbor condo. Sometimes the containers take up two and a half shelves.

It drives her boyfriend nuts, she said.

"He opens it up and says, 'There's no room for food.'"

Researchers with the U.S. Department of Agriculture put each insect type through years of testing to make sure it attacks only one weed, Andreas said.

"In some instances they have attacked other species, but it's really rare."

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