

GIANT HOGWEED CONTROL ON THE WICK RIVER

COUNTRYSIDE RANGERS PROJECT REPORT

PREPARED FOR NATURE.SCOT



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Project Summary

Giant hogweed control was undertaken during the 2026 growing season within the Wick River catchment as part of the ongoing programme to reduce and ultimately eradicate the species from the area.

Survey and control work focused on known infestation sites around Lower Gillock and additional sections of the Wick River corridor between Bilbster and Wick. Both mature flowering plants and juvenile plants were identified during the course of the project.

All immature plants encountered were controlled through manual root cutting. Mature flowering umbels were removed and safely contained to prevent seed production and dispersal.

The limited number of plants encountered suggests that previous years of control work have significantly reduced the population. However, the presence of both mature and juvenile plants indicates that continued annual monitoring and intervention remain necessary while viable seed persists within the soil seed bank.

1. Project Background

Giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) remains one of the most significant invasive non-native plant species affecting river catchments within Scotland.

The species spreads rapidly through prolific seed production and can dominate riparian habitats, reducing biodiversity and increasing bank erosion following winter dieback. In addition, contact with giant hogweed sap presents a significant health risk due to its phototoxic properties.

NatureScot has supported long-term control efforts within the Wick River catchment, with particular focus on areas around Lower Gillock and sections of the river corridor where historic infestations have been recorded.

The 2026 programme continued this work through targeted survey and control operations designed to reduce surviving populations and identify any newly emerging plants.





Project Objectives

The objectives of the project were:

- Survey known giant hogweed locations at Lower Gillock.
- Survey sections of the Wick River between Bilbster and Wick.
- Record the location and extent of infestations.
- Control all giant hogweed plants located during surveys.
- Prevent flowering plants from producing viable seed.
- Collect photographic evidence of infestations and control measures.
- Provide an end-of-project report summarising findings and outcomes



Map 1: Overview map showing main colonies along Wick River (in yellow) and the named SSSIs (in red hatching).

Survey Method

Targeted surveys were undertaken during the growing season when giant hogweed plants were readily identifiable.

Visit 1 to know area of infestation; Lower Gillock.

This visit was timed when the plants were around knee-height, late spring, usually April/May. At this stage, the emerging plants are easily seen and not hidden by other vegetation. They should be small enough to tackle comfortably with a spade.

Visit 2 to know area of infestation; Lower Gillock.

This visit should coincide with the first appearance of flowers but before the development of seeds in early summer. Usually around June depending on the season. At this time of year, any mature plants have grown to full size. Any mature plants which were missed during the April/May visit should be easily seen, even at distance. Special care should be taken to search amongst trees and dense scrub. If this visit is delayed, the control of giant hogweed becomes more hazardous and maturing seeds must be removed off-site. The focus of this visit is to control any mature plants before their seeds develop. However, effort should also be made to locate and control immature plants, including any newly germinated seedlings.

Survey walk of Wick River between Bilbster and Wick.

This survey will be most effective when the plants are tall but before they set seed (and therefore most visible, even at distance). This survey was therefore undertaken around the same time as the 2nd control visit, in early summer.

Survey effort focused on:

- Known infestation sites.
- Riverbanks and associated riparian habitats.
- Areas previously supporting giant hogweed populations.
- Locations identified during earlier control programmes.
- Both banks were visually inspected where access and visibility allowed.

Control Method

Manual control techniques were employed throughout the project.

Juvenile Plants

Immature plants were controlled through root cutting using a sharp spade. The tap root was severed below the growing crown in order to prevent regrowth.

Mature Plants

Flowering plants were controlled through removal of flowering structures using a pruning saw. Flower heads were removed and secured in refuse sacks to minimise the risk of seed dispersal.

Health and Safety

Appropriate personal protective equipment was worn throughout operations.

Particular care was taken to avoid exposure to giant hogweed sap due to its known phototoxic effects. Work was undertaken in accordance with standard operational risk assessments for invasive species control.

Lower Gillock

Survey work on visit one (1st May 2026) identified 7 immature giant hogweed plants with a further 43 plants of uncertain species but closely resembling giant hogweed removed as a precaution. Staff from NatureScot and HighLife Countryside Rangers were present.



Fig 1 Immature plant cut at the tap root with a sharp spade 1.05.26



Fig 2 Two flowering spikes viewed from the opposite river bank 25.06.2026



Fig 3 flowering spike within the Lower Gillock area 25.06.26

Survey work on visit two (25th June 2026) identified 2 mature giant hogweed plants growing within the dense willow scrub vegetation. The two mature flowering spikes were observed from the opposite bank and required immediate control to prevent seed dispersal. The flower spikes were cut down, bagged and disposed of.

The presence of these mature plants demonstrates the continuing importance of annual survey work within the area. Immature plants can be missed during the first survey due to the incredibly dense vegetation.



Fig 4, 5, 6 characteristic features of giant hogweed aiding in identification and seeds beginning to form on the flower head.

Wick River corridor, Bilbster to Wick

Early summer survey walk (15th June 2026) identified one isolated juvenile giant hogweed plant located on the north bank of the Wick River at:

Grid Reference: ND 296533

The plant was identified before flowering and successfully controlled through root cutting.



Fig 7 and 8 showing immature giant hogweed controlled by spade on north bank of the river.

Findings

LOWER GILLOCK

- Mature flowering plants remain present at Lower Gillock.
- Plants were generally isolated rather than forming extensive colonies.
- Dense vegetation continues to complicate detection.
- Historical control work appears to have substantially reduced overall infestation levels.

WICK RIVER

- Juvenile plants continue to emerge from the historic seed bank.
- Early-season survey work remains highly effective.
- Newly identified plants can be treated before reaching reproductive maturity.

Other locality

A member of the public contacted the Ranger service in early July to report a giant hogweed growing in the roadside verge of the A99 just west of the driveway to Ackergill Tower. On visiting the site a mature plant beginning to form seed was found. The flower heads were cut and bagged for disposal. On speaking to the gardening team at Ackergill Tower it was reported that there have been no more found close by, and they will keep an eye out for them in future.

One report which was anecdotal said that there was once giant hogweed growing within the grounds nearer the castle, but it had long since (decades ago) been dealt with by the gardeners. While it would be reasonable to expect to find giant hogweed in the grounds of an old estate house it would seem more likely that this plant may have found its way here due to wind blown seed from the existing sources at Gillock and Bilbster. The map included show that this individual was growing only 1.4km NNE of Lower Gillock.

Grid Reference ND 346 535



Fig 9,10 & 11 giant hogweed on the verge of the A99 developing seed.

Fig 12 Map of the further plant found at Grid Ref: ND 346 535. Red circle gives location and red line shows its relative location compared to Lower Gillock.



Conclusion

The 2026 survey and control programme achieved its objectives. Giant hogweed populations within the Wick River catchment appear to be continuing a long-term decline. The majority of plants encountered were isolated individuals rather than extensive stands.

While this represents significant progress, the appearance of both juvenile and mature plants demonstrates that eradication has not yet been achieved.

The continued emergence of plants is likely attributable to the historic soil seed bank, which remains capable of producing new individuals several years after mature plants have been removed.

Consequently, the need for ongoing survey and control work remains.

The 2026 Giant Hogweed Control Project successfully located and controlled giant hogweed plants within the Wick River catchment.

Mature flowering plants at Lower Gillock were treated before significant seed production occurred and flowering material was removed from site for safe disposal. Juvenile plants identified and elsewhere within the catchment were effectively controlled through root cutting.

The findings indicate that previous years of management have significantly reduced infestation levels. However, isolated mature plants and newly emerging juvenile plants continue to occur, highlighting the importance of ongoing annual monitoring and intervention.

Continued management will be required to address recruitment from the remaining seed bank and achieve the long-term objective of complete eradication of giant hogweed from the Wick River catchment.

Control Outcomes

All giant hogweed plants encountered during the 2026 programme were successfully controlled.

Control measures included:

- Root cutting of juvenile plants.
- Removal of flowering umbels.
- Containment of reproductive material for disposal.
- Photographic recording of treatment operations.

No large-scale dense infestations were encountered during the reporting period.

The low numbers of plants recorded indicate that long-term management is producing positive results.



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