

SPACE INVADERS!

by Lee Lamb

The aliens arrive unnoticed, riding on a breeze, tucked in tire treads, clinging to an elk's belly hair or a hunter's pant leg. They drop to the ground and begin to grow fast. They may look innocent enough at first, even pretty. But then they begin to multiply, pushing out the locals and leaving animals' bellies empty as they spread throughout the countryside. Getting them to leave is downright difficult—sometimes impossible. You guessed it ... *weeds*.

OB-NOXIOUS

Noxious (nock-shus) weeds such as spotted knapweed, leafy spurge and yellow starthistle are not native to North America. Some were brought here on purpose, while others arrived accidentally in shipments of grain or wheat. Having no natural enemies here, these alien, or *exotic*, plant species easily outcompete native grasses and wildflowers for water, sunlight and space. If left unchecked, weeds can invade and conquer a meadow, hillside or valley bottom in no time flat.

BLECH!

So what's the big deal? For one thing, elk, deer and cows won't eat noxious weeds because they can't digest them or they taste terrible. Some are even poisonous. Birds and mice won't hide or nest in them. Some weeds dry out early in the growing season, creating fuel for summer wildfires. Many weeds' roots don't hold the soil well, which leads to erosion that chokes trout streams with silt and muck.

BEETLE BRIGADE

Once weeds get the upper hand in elk country, they are hard to get rid of. In many cases all habitat managers can do is try to stop weeds from spreading farther. They pull them by hand, spray them with herbicides, and turn loose domestic goats and sheep to eat them. Some of the best soldiers in the fight are bugs. Biologists import armies of beetles and flies from places in the world where plants like spotted knapweed are native. Just like back home, the insects chow down on the weed's roots and seed heads, slowing or even stopping the spread of knapweed in some areas.

EVIL ALIENS

You can help fight the aliens by learning what they look like. Watch for them when you're out in the woods and tell a grownup if you see them.

CAN YOU UNSCRAMBLE THESE NAMES, THEN MATCH THEM TO THEIR PICTURE USING THE CLUES?

(If you get confused, see the list of unscrambled names at the bottom of the opposite page.)



TTEODSP WEEPADKN

2-4 feet tall, rough stalks and stems, deeply lobed leaves, pink to light purple flower with black spots at the base of the flower.

YEALF UEGRSP

2-3 feet tall, many smooth stems branching from base, leaves shaped like lances, clusters of greenish-yellow flowers, poisonous milky sap in all parts of the plant—don't touch!

LWELYO HATSLERTIT

1-5 feet tall, blue-green stems and leaves covered with woolly hair, bright yellow flowers with spiky spines like a death star all around the base of the flower.

RSHTCSEGAA

8 inches to 2 feet tall, grass with skinny stems and lots of hairy seedheads drooping down, whole plant turns rusty red to dull purple by mid-summer.

Spotted Knapweed, Leafy Spurge, Yellow Starthistle, Cheatgrass