

# Queuing up the Olives: Confronting an Invasive Tree

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**A** gram of prevention outweighs a kilogram of cure, although we are often far better at responding to crises than we are at preventing them. At this moment, however, we do have the opportunity to prevent a small but very significant ecological crisis.

The Russian olive tree (*Eleagnus angustifolia*—no relation to the real olive) was brought to North America from southern Europe in the early 1900s, first as a windbreak tree and later as a drought-tolerant ornamental. The tree, which can also grow as a shrub, has now taken over wetlands and waterways throughout the western United States and is poised to do the same in the wetlands of British Columbia's Southern Interior. The grayish leaves and gnarled trunks of the Russian olive are now a depressingly common sight throughout the South Okanagan and Similkameen valleys. The tree also has a solid foothold in and around Kamloops.



**Figure 1. Satellite image of Osoyoos Oxbows, between Osoyoos Lake and Road 22. Round grey dots are Russian olive trees. The Oxbows are a nationally Important Bird Area and have very high biodiversity.**

Note: Image has been rotated 90°; Highway 97 is along the bottom and north is to the left.

Why single out this particular species when dozens of other alien invasives plague British Columbia? First, let's look at the tree's preferred habitat, the low-elevation Interior wetlands. These ecosystems possess not only the highest overall biodiversity in the

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province but also the greatest concentrations of species at risk. Second, the tree fixes atmospheric nitrogen and subsequently releases it into adjacent water bodies, causing nutrient pollution. Third, the tree has an innate ability to grow and spread rapidly, a spread enhanced by the many commercial nurseries that still sell it. Birds are fond of the olive-shaped fruit, further helping to disperse the indigestible seeds. And fourth, it is a challenge to eradicate. Cut down a Russian olive and in the blink of an eye a multitude of new shoots appear, sprouting from its extensive underground rhizome network.

Russian olive is not currently listed in British Columbia's Noxious Weed Act. I think it is high time this tree gets moved up the queue and declared "Noxious," so it begins to get the critical attention it richly deserves.

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