The Howe Trust is a volunteer-run charity that provides support to local residents in times of need and manages 26 acres of land. Of this, 6 acres are allotments, 9.5 acres are sheep meadow, and the remaining 10.5 acres include scrub, paths, a memorial tree area, several copses, five ponds, and 5 acres of wild grassland.

In 2009 the Trust commissioned a review of the land by an eminent ecologist Rod d'Ayala. Some of the resultant survey and management suggestions were actioned but in 2023, the Trust voted to move into a new management plan focusing on a greater number of the nature recovery and biodiversity recommendations, while maintaining access for local residents.

We does not currently graze horses on The Howe, and the sheep are grazed at conservation grazing levels. This less intensive grazing strategy aims to create a varied and dense sward of grasses but as the land recovers from previously intensive horse grazing, several plant species have colonised bare soil. Five of these are listed under the Weeds Act 1959, and at least three have increased in some areas, raising concerns among neighbours.

The Trust has always had an injurious weeds (ragwort) management policy, and as more information becomes available and best practices change and develop, we have followed the actions and recommendation of nature-friendly experts in this area such as the Wildlife Trust. This approach is designed to reassure neighbours while ensuring that the objectives of the nature recovery project are not compromised.

Figure 1: Hauling ragwort

Contents

1. Introduction & Purpose

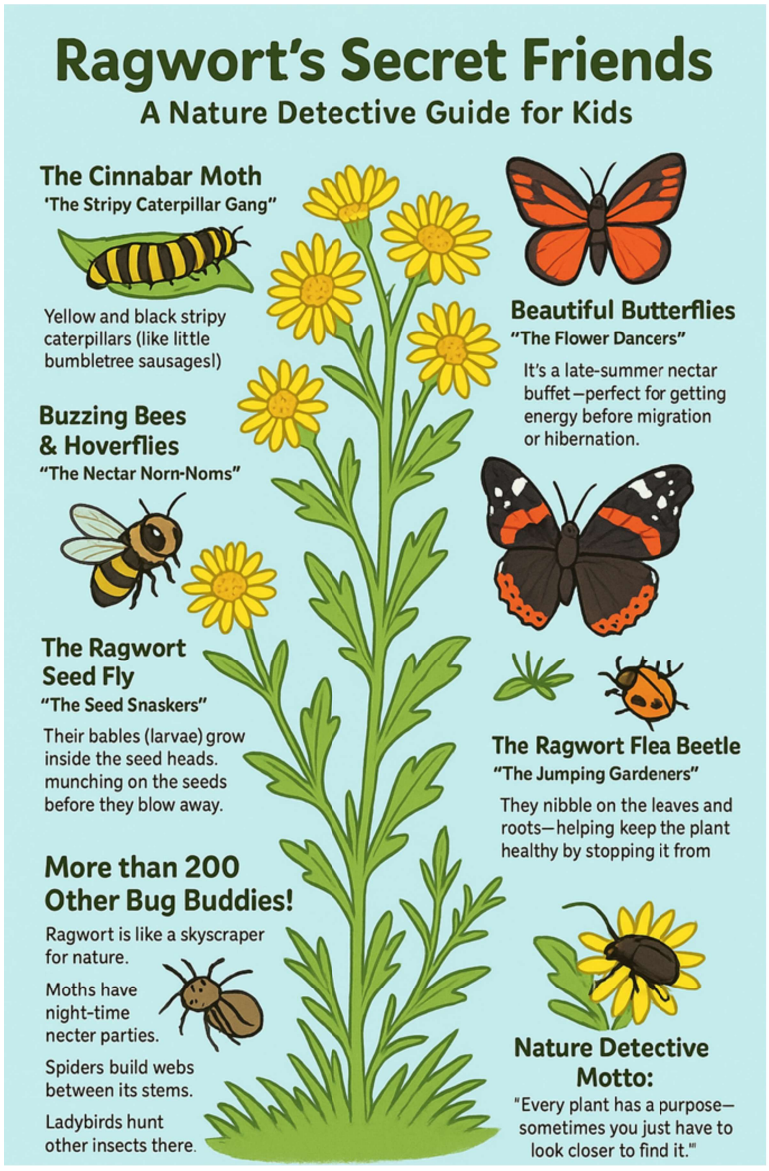
The Howe Trust manages its land in line with rewilding principles, aiming to enhance biodiversity while respecting neighbouring land uses. This policy sets out how the Howe Trust addresses concerns about ragwort, balancing wildlife benefits with legal obligations and livestock safety. Advocacy for biodiversity throughout this document reflects the Howe Trust's conservation stance.

2. Legal Context

The main legislation governing injurious weeds in England and Wales includes:

- Weeds Act 1959:

Enables authorities to issue notices requiring landowners to control the spread of injurious weeds (including ragwort, spear thistle, creeping thistle, broad-leaved dock, curled dock). It is not an offence to have these plants on land, but it is an offence to allow them to spread.



- Ragwort Control Act 2003:

Introduced a Code of Practice to guide responsible ragwort management. The Code is not legally binding but can be used as evidence in enforcement cases.

The Defra Code of Practice on how to prevent the spread of ragwort has been drawn up in conjunction with the British Horse Society, English Nature, ADAS and other organisations, and this Code should be read by all concerned. It is readily available on https://www.gov.uk/.

Please see Appendix B for a summarised version of the government issued document.

3. Ecological Importance of Ragwort

Ragwort is often labelled a weed, but ecologically it is a keystone native plant. It supports over 200 invertebrate species, including at least 30 that depend on it entirely. Pollinators such as bees, butterflies, moths, and hoverflies rely on its nectar. Predators including birds, bats, and small mammals feed on ragwort-dependent insects. While toxic

to some livestock, ragwort is vital for sustaining biodiversity.

Please see Appendix A for more comprehensive information about ragwort.

4. Risk Assessment & Management Policy

Following the UK Code of Practice, the Howe Trust applies risk zoning:

- High Risk: Flowering ragwort within 50 m of grazing or forage land
- Medium Risk: Within 50–100 m
- Low Risk: Beyond 100 m

On Howe Trust land, horse grazing or forage production areas are currently beyond 100m from any grazing or forage land , placing ragwort in the Low Risk category.

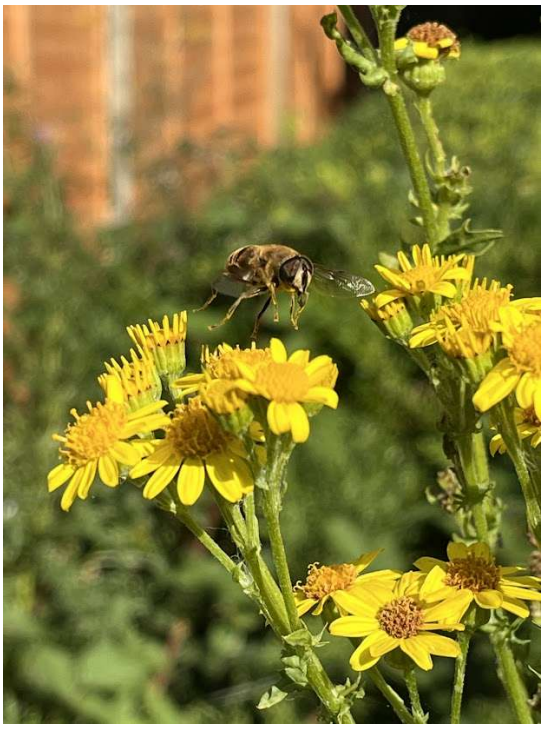


Figure 2: Bees on ragwort

Management focuses on:

- Annual topping in late July/early August (after nesting birds, before seed dispersal).
- Selective hand-pulling in sensitive locations.
- No herbicide use, in line with Soil Association organic standards.
- Safe disposal of uprooted plants (bagging and removal).

The goal is control, not eradication, to balance livestock safety and biodiversity.

Other relevant aspects:

- Responsibility: The responsibility for controlling ragwort rests with the occupier of the land where it is growing.
- Private Land and Permission: It is an offence to uproot a wild plant (including ragwort) without the landowner's permission.

5. Other Injurious Weeds

Other species of concern on Howe Trust land include creeping thistle, spear thistle, broad-leaved dock, and curled dock. These are managed by cutting at key times to limit spread and seed production. As with ragwort, complete eradication is neither legally required nor ecologically beneficial.

These plants thrive on bare ground, but as a stable grass cover develops, their numbers are expected to decline naturally. This process, known as vegetation succession, is well documented in ecological research.

The Howe Trust is supported in its approach by respected organisations including the

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Freshwater Habitats Trust, Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, and the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust.

Figure 3: Sheep overlooking pasture

6. Livestock & Public Safety

Ragwort contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids, which can cause liver damage in grazing animals e.g. horses and cattle, especially when ingested in dried form (hay or silage).
While sheep generally avoid ragwort, caution is maintained through management actions agreed with the sheep owners.
Fresh ragwort is bitter and typically avoided by grazing animals.
Gloves are recommended when handling ragwort, as it may cause skin irritation.
Children should be supervised to avoid contact.
Overall, with regular inspection, management and maintenance, in accordance with guidance, the risk to both people and livestock is low.

Figure 4: Guided walk June 2025

7. Community Engagement

The Howe Trust actively communicates its land management practices through parish newsletters, talks, social media, and community events. The Trust also engages schools and volunteers to promote awareness of ragwort's dual role: hazardous to livestock if unmanaged, yet ecologically vital.

8. Flexibility & Compliance

The Howe Trust commits to complying with the UK Weeds Act 1959 and following the Defra Code of Practice on Ragwort. The Trust will follow best practice in ragwort control and take reasonable steps to prevent the spread of species identified under the Act.

This policy is based on information and research judged to be of good scientific origin and accurate at the time of writing. It will be reviewed and adjusted as new, reputable scientific evidence becomes available. Management will be adapted where necessary to balance conservation priorities with neighbour concerns.

Q: Is ragwort dangerous to livestock?
A: Yes, mainly when dried in hay or silage. Fresh plants are unpalatable and so are usually avoided by livestock.

Q: Why does the Trust leave some ragwort?
A: To support pollinators and specialist insects. Only plants in high-risk locations/numbers are removed.

Q: How is spread prevented?
A: By maintaining healthy swards, pulling before seed set, and safe disposal of removed plants.

Q: Could children be harmed?
A: Risk is very low. Gloves are recommended for handling, and children should be supervised.

Q: Why does the land seem to be left uncared for instead of being maintained for the villagers?
A: The Howe manages the land as per the recommendations of our ecological survey and has a detailed plan for every area. Our approach is also in line with DEFRA best practice. While some green space management is necessary for public safety and enjoyment, over-managing can harm biodiversity and the natural environment. Tidiness and maintenance focus on human impact: removing litter, keeping paths clear, and maintaining infrastructure.
Please see the Howe Trust's Policy on Ecological Tidiness. www.howetrust.org.uk

Appendix A – Ragwort: Ecology and Wildlife Connections

1. About the Plant


Figure 5: Common Ragwort

Common ragwort (Jacobaea vulgaris, previously Senecio jacobaea) is a native wildflower in the UK, also found across Europe, Western Asia, and North America. It thrives on dry, disturbed, or chalky soils but does poorly on wetlands or shaded areas like woodlands and hedgerows.

• Appearance: Ragwort starts as a flat rosette of leaves, later sending up tall yellow flower stems that usually grow 30–90 cm, though some can be much taller in ideal conditions.

• Other ragworts in Britain:

◦ Hoary ragwort (S. erucifolius) – fairly common, prefers base-rich soils.

◦ Marsh ragwort (S. aquaticus) – found near wet meadows, streams, and rivers.

◦ Oxford ragwort (S. squalidus) – an introduced species that thrives on railway embankments, walls, and waste ground.

• Britain also has other native ragworts and groundsels, though some are rare or localised.

Ragwort's bright yellow flowers make it highly noticeable, and although it is sometimes called a "weed," it plays a crucial role in nature.

2. Insect Fauna

Ragwort is one of the most important plants for insects in the countryside and even on urban waste ground.

- At least 77 insect species feed directly on ragwort leaves, stems, flowers, or seeds.
- About 52 of these regularly depend on it as a main food source.
- Ragwort nectar supports over 117 species of insects, including:
  - More than 30 solitary bees.
  - Many hoverflies.
  - Butterflies such as the Small Copper.
  - Around 40 species of noctuid moths.

Because so many insects breed inside the plant's stems and seedheads, pulling or mowing ragwort too aggressively can wipe out their breeding habitat.

Some of these insects are themselves host to parasitic insects, meaning ragwort also supports those food webs. To survive, these species need ragwort to appear year after year in good numbers.

3. Pollinators & Wider Community

Ragwort is a powerhouse for pollinators and biodiversity.

- Around 178 insect species have been recorded using ragwort.
- At least 27 of these species feed on ragwort exclusively.
- Over 200 invertebrate species rely on it for nectar, food, or habitat.
- Ragwort is especially important to:
  - Bees (including 30+ solitary bee species).
  - Butterflies like the red admiral and peacock.
  - Hoverflies and moths.
  - ~40 species of noctuid moths that rely heavily on its nectar.

By feeding insects, ragwort also supports birds, bats, small mammals, and predatory

insects, making it a vital part of wider food chains.

4. Key Species That Rely on Ragwort

Specialist Species

- Cinnabar moth (Tyria jacobaeae) – caterpillars feed almost only on ragwort, storing toxins for defence.
- Hoverfly (Cheilosia bergenstammi) – adults feed on nectar, larvae on plant tissues.
- Ragwort seed fly (Botanophila seneciella) – larvae feed in seed heads, used in biocontrol.
- Tansy ragwort flea beetle (Longitarsus jacobaeae) – larvae feed on roots, adults on leaves (biocontrol agent).

Other Ragwort-Specific Invertebrates (~30 species)

- Beetles: e.g., Olibrus corticalis, Phyllotreta nodicornis, Longitarsus dorsalis.
- Flies: e.g., Campiglossa malaris, Contarinia jacobaeae, Napomyza lateralis.
- Micro-moths: e.g., Cochylis atricapitana, Hellinsia chrysocomae, Platyptilia isodactyla.
- Other: ragwort aphid (Aphis jacobaeae), thrips (Haplothrips senecionis), gall mite (Aceria leioproctus).

Figure 6: Cinnabar moth caterpillars on ragwort

Figure 7: Hoverfly on ragwort

Figure 9: Ragwort seed fly

Figure 8: Ragwort flea beetle

Major Associates (~22 species)

- Moths: e.g., Eupithecia virgaureata, Heliothis peltigera, Cochylis dubitana.
- Flies: e.g., Sphenella marginata, Trypeta zoe.
- Pollinators: numerous solitary bees, , and other insects strongly linked with ragwort.

5. Seed Distribution

Ragwort is a prolific seed producer, though actual numbers vary.

- A single plant can produce up to 30,000 seeds.
- Many are lost to insects that eat the flowers and seeds.
- About 60% of seeds fall near the base of the parent plant.
- Seed dispersal drops off quickly with distance:
  - ~11,700 seeds may fall 4.5 m away.
  - Only ~1.5 seeds reach 36 m (120 ft).

Most seeds are wind-dispersed by their little “parachutes,” but, in reality, ragwort seeds don’t travel far.

In summary: Ragwort is far more than a “weed.” It is a lifeline for hundreds of insect species, a key part of food chains, and a colourful, native wildflower that deserves its place in the landscape.

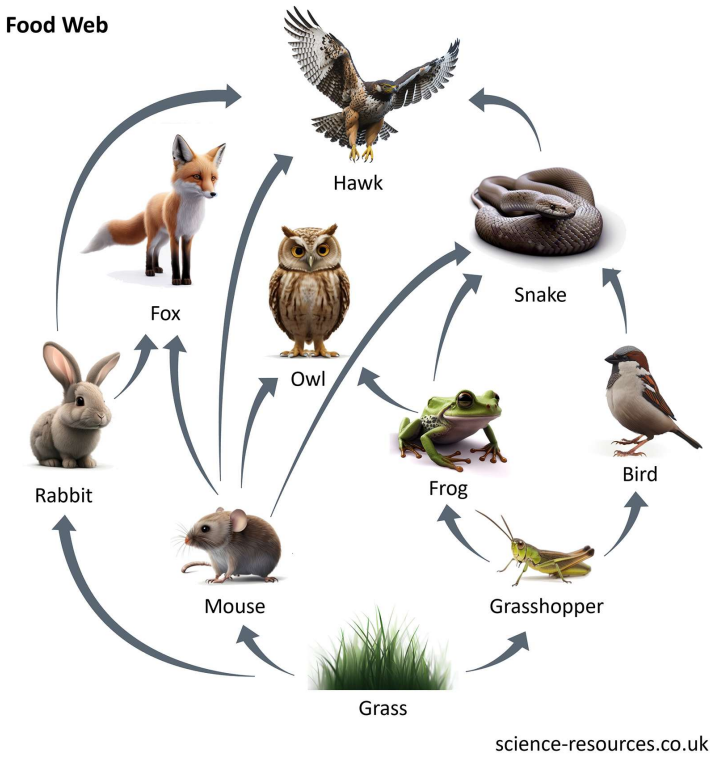


Figure 10: Example of a food web

Appendix B – Summary of Defra Code of Practice

Step	Action
1	Identify risk - assess proximity to grazing or forage land
2	Manage strategically - maintain dense cover, monitor regularly
3	Control appropriately - choose pulling, cutting, or chemicals as fit
4	Prioritize safety & biodiversity -minimise harm to ecosystems
5	Dispose safely - contain or transport using compliant methods

1. Purpose & Legal Context

- The Code provides guidance—not a legal obligation—for managing ragwort, especially where it poses risks to horses, livestock, or forage production. It can be used as evidence in enforcement actions under the *Weeds Act 1959* and the *Ragwort Control Act 2003*.

2. Why Control Ragwort?

- Ragwort is toxic to animals - especially when it's dried or in hay/silage - and can cause severe, even fatal, liver damage.
- However, it supports biodiversity (nectar for insects, habitat for many species), so eradication isn't encouraged where it doesn't pose a risk.

3. Risk Assessment

- High Risk: Flowering/seeding ragwort within 50 m of grazing or forage land.
- Medium Risk: Within 50 - 100 m.
- Low Risk: More than 100 m away.
- Control efforts should focus on high and medium-risk areas.

4. Responsibilities

- Land occupiers are responsible for control on their land. Cooperation with neighbouring owners is encouraged to ensure effective management.

5. Control Strategies

A. Preventive Land Management

- Promote dense vegetation—avoid overgrazing or disturbance that allows ragwort to establish.

B. Active Control Methods

- Pulling/digging: Effective when done carefully; remove all roots to prevent regrowth.
- Cutting: Reduces flowering and seed release but may encourage re-growth if roots remain.
- Chemical control: Herbicide use should be risk-assessed (impact on non-target plants, environment).
- Biological control: In some regions, insects like the cinnabar moth or ragwort flea beetle are used.

C. Health & Environmental Considerations

- Ensure discarded ragwort doesn't contaminate hay, silage, or grazing areas.
- Avoid non-selective spraying that harms wildlife and habitats

6. Disposal Guidance

- Small amounts: Heap in a covered container (e.g., compost bin) to prevent seed spread.
- Large volumes: Use biomass facilities or incinerators (permit required).
- Off-site disposal: Must use registered waste carriers and suitable sites to avoid legal penalties.

Appendix C – Image credits

Figure 1: Hauling ragwort [Photo by W.Stanton]

Figure 2: Bees on ragwort [Photo byby Dr A.Julian]
Figure 3: Sheep overlooking pasture [Photo by M.Fyffe]
Figure 4: Guided walk June 2025 [Photo by E.Madden]
Figure 5: Common Ragwort [Photo by M.Fyffe]
Figure 6: Cinnabar moth caterpillars on ragwort [Photo by Dr A.Julian]
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Figure 10: Example of a Food web [Illustration from http://science-resources.co.uk] licensed for educational purposes only.