

State Grasses

Danny Freeman

Perennial grasses are very basic to the well-being and future of the Society for Range Management. For that reason, about two years ago, I thought it would be fun to write a story on the various state and provincial official grasses. This turned out to be a major undertaking because there are so few. There are none in Canada or Mexico. Bob Lodge says the Canadian Provinces have official flowers and beasts but not grasses. Alicia Castillo reports that there are no official grasses in Mexico but says the most important grass in the state of Chihuahua is *Bouteloua gracilis*, commonly called *navajita* in Mexico, and known as blue grama in the United States.

None of the eastern states in the United States have official grasses, and only nine do in the 19 western states. The ten not having official grasses are: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Utah, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and Hawaii. However, the first six of these are working to get one named. In Arizona the Arizona Section, SRM; state chapter of the Soil Conservation Society of America; and the Arizona Cattle Growers Association have narrowed the field down to sideoats grama and bush muhly. The California Section, SRM, through Pete Sands, chairman, State Grass Committee, is actively seeking legislative action and has a sponsor for a bill making purple needlegrass (*Stipa pulcre*) the State Grass. The Colorado Section, SRM, is working to get a State Grass named. A State Grass committee for the Idaho Section, SRM, has been named

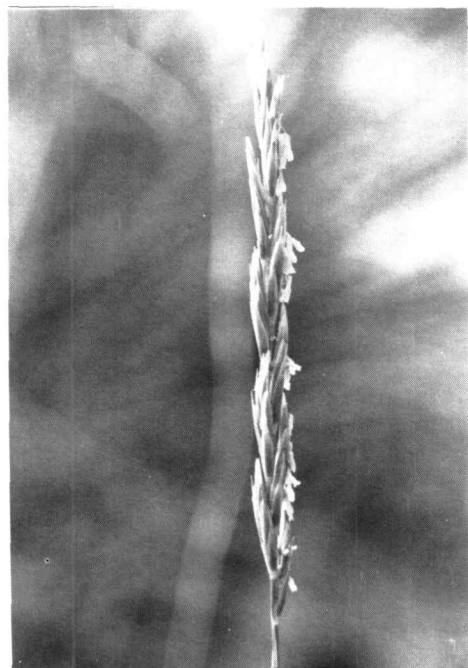


Photo by John Speck, University of Wyoming.
Closeup of Wyoming wheatgrass.



Photo by Peter Sands, University of California at Davis.
Purple needlegrass.

with Jens Jensen serving as chairman. That committee is working hard to get an official grass named. It most likely will be Idaho fescue. The Kansas/Oklahoma Section, SRM, through Bob Lippert, and Bob Nicholson, is working to get the Kansas state legislature to name big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardi*) the official grass of Kansas. And the Utah Section has gone into motion to get a State Grass selected.

There is an interesting story in each of the nine states with official grasses. We learn how and why the grasses were chosen, their value and extent in the state, the organizations responsible for getting the grasses named, and when they were officially approved.

Wyoming

Twenty-seven years ago Governor Barrett designated 1952 as *Wyoming Grassland Improvement Year*. During that year the Range Management Department of the University of Wyoming was set up to act as a clearing house for an exchange of ideas throughout the state concerning the best grass to be named as the State Grass of Wyoming.

Wyoming Range Management Series No. 55, issued by the University in February 1953, showed that *Agropyron smithii*, christened Wyoming wheatgrass, had clearly won the decision to become the State Grass. From that time (1952) it has been the State Grass. It is commonly called western wheatgrass in other states, but not in Wyoming.

Esthetically it has a nice symmetry both in the spike and the individual spikelets—it would look good on a coat of arms. It is a pretty, tall, proud-looking grass. Wyoming wheatgrass was chosen as the State Grass because it occurs throughout the state except in areas above 7,500 feet elevation. Alan Beetle says, "It is well adapted to dry, alkaline soils, grows in deep soils and in poor soils, too. Above all it has nutritive value and has raised many a herd of animals and held many acres of good mother earth right in Wyoming where it belongs."

Further information about why and how this grass was named the State Grass of Wyoming can be found on page 9, *Rangeman's News* for October, 1969.

Nebraska

Nebraska was the first state in the United States to have the state legislature name an official grass. Little bluestem was so named in 1969. It was chosen because it occurs naturally in every county in the state. Range surveys show it furnishes more total forage than any other single grass in Nebraska.

The Nebraska Section, SRM, and Nebraska chapters of SCSA sponsored the bill, which was written by Stan W. Matzke and introduced by Maurice A. Kremer and Wayne L. Schreurs. It was the shortest legislative bill ever signed into law in Nebraska. It simply read, "Little bluestem known as *Andropogon scoparius*, is hereby declared the official state grass of Nebraska." Its final reading was on May 1, 1969, and it was signed into law by Governor Norbert T. Tieman.

A writeup on this action is on page 1, *Rangeman's News* for August, 1969. Others who worked to get the bill passed were: Robert W. Eikleberry, D.E. Hutchinson, Arnold Heerwagen, Donald Atkins, Don Cox, and Peter Jensen.

South Dakota

In South Dakota a special SRM committee was set up to get a grass named as the State Grass. Western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*) was designated as the State Grass and the bill, cosponsored by James D. Jelbert and Walter D. Miller, was signed into law by Governor Frank Farrar on Feb. 18, 1970.

Western wheatgrass was chosen because of its adaptability and occurrence on a large number of range sites throughout South Dakota. It produces high quality hay when moisture is adequate and provides year-around grazing for livestock. Among the desirable and abundant grasses, its vigorous rhizomes make it one of the most tolerant to grazing and droughts. Grazing abuse, however, especially in May and June, will decrease its abundance. When growing conditions improve, following drought and/or overgrazing, it may rapidly recolonize areas having less than 15 inches of annual precipitation, but it can temporarily invade areas previously occupied by tall grasses when they are forced out by severe conditions.

A short story about this grass appeared on page 1, *Rangeman's News* for June 1970. It told about how the strong rhizomes and robust seed of South Dakota western wheatgrass will in time move westward and undoubtedly replace the ecotype that had been labeled Wyoming wheatgrass!

And finally, there is a complete writeup of western wheatgrass by Patricia J. Latas and Robert A. Nicholson in the February 1976 issue of *Rangeman's Journal*.

Texas

Sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*) was named the State Grass of Texas on April 1, 1971, by Texas Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 31. The Texas Section, SRM, and State Council, SCSA, were cosponsors of the project.

According to Bob J. Ragsdale, this highly palatable mid-grass is found in all parts of Texas except extreme East Texas in the pineywoods vegetation areas. It is a key range grass and desirable as a forage plant for domestic livestock and wildlife. It flowers from June to mid-November and has both a rhizomatous and non-rhizomatous variety.

Oklahoma

A concurrent resolution designating Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) as the State Grass of Oklahoma was adopted by the State Senate on January 24, 1972, and two days later by the House of Representatives.

From James B. McCampbell: "Indiangrass is found in all of the 77 counties in the state. A native, perennial, warm-season



Photo by Bob Ragsdale Texas A&M University
Sideoats grama.

tallgrass, it is also a decreaser plant on bluestem ranges. It is nutritious, readily eaten by all classes of livestock, and furnishes cover and protection for numerous kinds of wildlife. Generally, it is not used for food by wildlife."

From Ernest C. Snook: "Indiangrass has been in the past, and remains today, one of the most productive, palatable, and important native grasses in Oklahoma. It is also one of the most beautiful grasses in the state. Oklahoma means "Home of the Red Man" and this state has more Indians than any other state. So, it is befitting to have Indiangrass as the State Grass."

New Mexico

Stan Tixier, president of the New Mexico Section, SRM, was the big pusher to get a State Grass named in New Mexico. The effort was spearheaded by the New Mexico Section, with Bill Courier and Bill Fallis out in front. Later, however, other groups came in with their support. Mainly, these were user, conservation, and environmental groups. The New Mexico Cattle Growers played a big role in the process.

Many grasses were considered, but since blue grama was so valuable and so abundant throughout the state it was chosen over the others. It is highly palatable and nutritious to all classes of livestock and big game.

The bill naming this grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*) as the State Grass for New Mexico was signed into law by Governor Bruce King on March 16, 1973.

Montana

In Montana it all started in the spring of 1972 when Joe Zacek, range conservationist for the Soil Conservation Service, gave a talk at the Montana state convention of the Parent-Teacher Association. He mentioned that since Montana was a range state it should have a State Grass. Toni Hagener (Mrs. Louis W.), a participant from Harve, Hill County, and chairman of a community development group called FORUM, was impressed with the idea and took it to her community action group. That group took it from there and gained the support of many organizations, including the Montana Wilderness Society, Montana Rural Areas Development Committee, Montana Stockgrowers, Montana Woolgrowers, and the Montana chapter

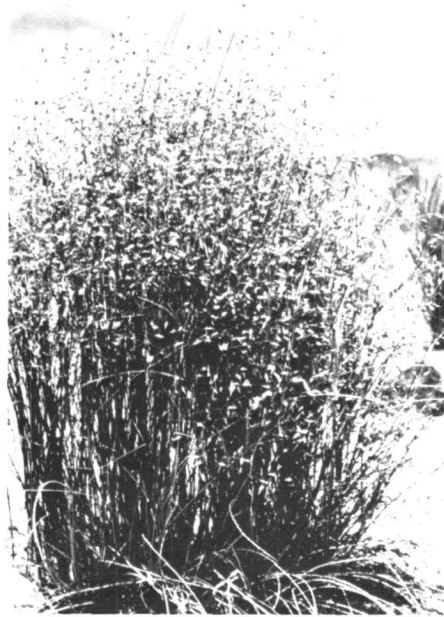


Photo by Joseph H. Robertson, University of Nevada at Reno
Indian ricegrass

of SCSA. In addition, many individual members of the Society for Range Management worked on this statewide worthwhile project.

Many grasses were considered but bluebunch wheatgrass won out because it occurs state-wide and is one of the most plentiful grasses in the native complex of vegetation. It grows on most soils in the state and is good feed for all classes of livestock and game. It greens up early in the spring and is also good forage in late fall and winter, although it is not very palatable in summer as it tends to get dry and rough then.

The following spring the Montana state legislature passed a bill naming bluebunch wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*) the official State Grass. Governor Tom Judge signed the bill on March 22, 1973.

Nevada

The Nevada Section, SRM, was instrumental in getting an official grass named for the state of Nevada. On April 19, 1977, Governor Mike O'Callagan signed the bill which states: "The grass known as Indian ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*) is hereby designated as the official grass of the state of Nevada."

The grass is found growing throughout the state and is considered an important forage species for all classes of livestock and for big and small game animals. In early times the seed of Indian ricegrass was an important source of food for Paiute and Shoshone Indians. They ground the seed into meal for use.

A complete writeup of this grass, by Joseph H. Robertson, appeared in the October 1977 issue of *Rangeman's Journal*.

North Dakota

Western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*) was chosen as the official grass of North Dakota because it is one of the most common and abundant grasses in the state. It is a native, cool-season, sod-forming grass with very strong rhizomes. Its leaves

are stiff, flat when green, rolled when dry, strongly ribbed on the upper surface, and feel rough to the touch.

Western wheatgrass grows from one to four feet tall and roots down to a depth of five feet or more. It yields about four times as much as blue grama in North Dakota; on overflow sites it can produce up to two tons of good quality hay per acre. It is one of the most tolerant of the desirable grasses in the state in reference to grazing pressure and drought.

In the old days before modern trucking and improved grasses, hay from this grass was known as race horse hay. Hundreds of tons of this hay were shipped by rail annually to race horse men in Kentucky. Because it was a strong feed it brought premium prices.

The North Dakota Chapter, SRM, was responsible for getting this grass named the official State Grass. The committee responsible included: Warren Whitman, Clayton Quinnald, William Barker, Kenneth Dohrmann, J.C. Shaver, Dee Galt, and Clair Michels.

The bill was signed into law by Governor Arthur Link on April 22, 1977.

Alaska and Hawaii

Even though there is no effort at this time to have a State Grass named in Alaska and Hawaii I think it appropriate and interesting to mention an important grass in each of these states. According to David Swanson, if a State Grass were named for Alaska, in all probability it would be bluejoint (*Calamagrostis canadensis*). This grass has a long history as a valuable grass in Alaska as it was used for feeding livestock by the Russian settlers as early as 1795 on Kodiak and Unalaska islands. It also provided hay for the horses used during the gold periods in Alaska and Yukon Territory, Canada. It was and still is the most common grass around the state, and its abundance makes it popular.

Bluejoint makes a fair hay for horses but cattle and sheep do not care for it much. Wildlife uses it to a small extent. It is a heavy producer on grassy meadow sites, where it may exceed 6,000 pounds per acre per year of dry herbage. It grows to 7 feet tall—sometimes even taller.

Bluejoint has a sentimental value, as it has been used by miners, trappers, reindeer herders, Eskimos, and Indians. Some of these uses have been mattress stuffing, dog bedding, and filling chinks in log cabins. It ranges from 69 north latitude south throughout the state, through Canada, and as far south as New Mexico.

Phyllis Charles reports that one of the more interesting grasses in Hawaii is piligrass (*Heteropogon contortus*), sometimes referred to as twisted beardgrass or tanglehead. It is not known for sure if this grass is native to Hawaii but it has been known there for many years. It was used by early Hawaiians for thatching their houses, and at present it is found in all Hawaiian islands. We know it is a native from Texas to Arizona and it probably is in Hawaii as well.

Piligrass is a branching, erect, shallow-rooted perennial that grows in rather large bunches, 1 to 3 feet tall. The one-sided, often nodding seedheads have conspicuous overlapping scales below and exhibit stout brown tangled bristles 2 to 4 inches long.

Piligrass is a palatable forage when young and in dry areas where feed is not usually abundant. Cattle will also graze it when it is old and dry. However, because of its shallow root system it is easily pulled up by grazing animals. ●