



GRASSES

Native Tall Grass Prairie

LITTLE BLUESTEM

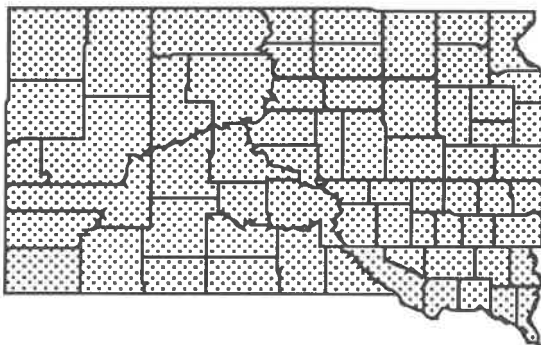
(*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

Description

While traveling along the road, have you ever wondered what the bunches of red grass are along many ridges and slopes? This grass could be little bluestem. The scientific name *scoparium* comes from a Greek word meaning broom-like, referring to the stiffly bunched stems. Little bluestem grows to a height of 1 to 4 feet (0.3 m to 1.2 m). The flat, hairless leaves of this species turn bluish-green to reddish-brown at maturity. The seeds are fluffy white by the end of the growing season.



Distribution



Species Distribution

Little bluestem is native to North American tall grass prairies although it can be found throughout South Dakota along ridges and in sandy soils. It is most abundant in the Black Hills and the remnant areas of tall grass prairie in the eastern part of the state. Wherever it is found, little bluestem is one of the *dominant species* in the area.

Natural History

Little bluestem is a *bunchgrass* that reproduces only by seeds. It is a warm season species that starts to grow in late spring, with the seedhead developing and maturing in August. Little bluestem is a *perennial* that produces several stems

from one set of fine, *fibrous roots* that serve to store food and hold the plant in the soil. Because little bluestem becomes coarse at the end of its growing season, it is often burned to enhance its nutritional quality. Burning releases nutrients, making them available for new plant growth.

Significance

Domestic and wild animals prefer to eat little bluestem when the plant is very young and green. After it has matured and reached the end of its growing season, the plant is very coarse and animals will not eat it. Little bluestem makes fine hay, but consecutive years of haying will cause it to disappear from the area.

Glossary

Bunchgrass - a type of grass that has many stems arising from one set of fine, fibrous roots.

Dominant species - a species in a community that significantly influences that community due to its greater population, size, or coverage.

Fibrous roots - a root system that consists of many fine branches.

Perennial - a plant that can live more than 2 years.

References

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- Hitchcock, A.J., 1971. Manual of Grasses of the U.S. Dover Publications, New York.
- Looman, Jan, 1982. Prairie Grasses, Pub. 1413. Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Ottawa, Canada
- VanBruggen, Theodore, 1983. Wildflowers, Grasses and Other Plants of the Northern Plains and Black Hills. Badlands Natural History Assoc., Interior, SD 57750.

Resources for Teachers

SDSU Range Club, College of Ag. and Biological Sciences, Brookings, SD 57007, dried plant mounts.

BHSU Herbarium, Spearfish, SD 57799, dried plant mounts.

County Extension Agents, U.S. Forest Service and Soil Cons. Service Offices (See Natural Source Directory).

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Illustration provided by University of Nebraska Press.

Publication of the *Little Bluestem* fact sheet was funded by the S.D. Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Division of Wildlife, Pierre, SD in cooperation with a Natural Resource Conservation Education Grant from the U.S. Forest Service.