

# The Grand Prairie Grass Identification Booklet

To construct the booklet, print out this PDF file front to back on regular letter sized paper. Then cut or tear the page in half horizontally and then vertically and assemble the pages.

The booklet is designed to fit easily into a pocket for field trips or seed gathering outings.

It should be understood that identifying prairie grasses is something of a challenge, especially before they develop their fairly distinctive flowers.

One detail about these plants that often offers very valuable clues about the grass is the junction of the leaf sheath and leaf blade where the leaf branches away from the grass stem or stalk.

This junction may be the location of hairs (big blue stem), white fuzz (switchgrass), a “rabbit ear” structure (Indian grass), a wrap-around collar or ligule (Canadian wild rye) or ligule and clawlike auricles (bottlebrush grass.) It might be noted there is no standardization or agreement about these terms. What one source calls a “ligule,” another may call an “auricle” for example.

Many times these distinctive junction characteristics are only evident or at least more evident when the leaf is slightly pulled away from the stem. Most of the junction illustrations in this booklet represent this “slightly pulled away” situation.

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To print out this booklet, go to:

[grandprairiefriends.org](http://grandprairiefriends.org)

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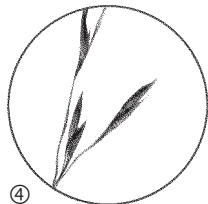
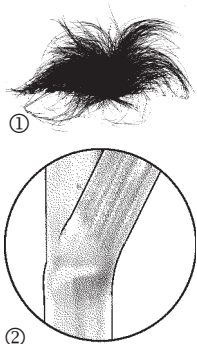
### Prairie Dropseed

*Sporobolus heterolepis*

1-2' tall dense clump of 3' long narrow 1/8" wide leaves. (1) A popular cultivated ornamental.

The junction. (2)

The seedhead, a delicate, rather slender panicle, (3) and the seeds. (4)



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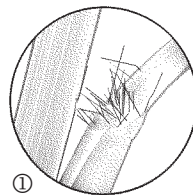
### Big Blue Stem

*Andropogon gerardii*

8' tall.

Leaves have hairs near the junction. (1) Other parts of the lower leaf and base of the plant may have hairs as well.

Sometimes known as “turkeyfoot” from the three-part seed head. (2)



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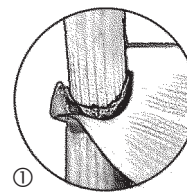
### Canada Wild Rye

*Elymus canadensis*

5' tall. An early colonizer often found in disturbed or recently established or restored contexts.

The ligule is a short, stiff membrane that wraps around the stem. (1)

Also called “nodding wild rye” for the downward curving seed heads. (2)



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### Cordgrass or Slough-grass

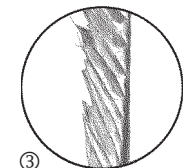
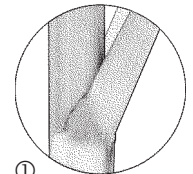
*Spartina pectinata*

6' tall. A bottomland plant.

**Toothy razor sharp leaves.** (Settlers called it ‘ripgut.’)

The leaf has a very prominent middle vein which forms the leaf into a long V-shaped trough at the junction (1)

Often does not produce the 10" (2) “comb-like” (3) seed head.



## Terms Used in this Booklet

auricle: ear-like structure

junction: the point where the leaf branches away from the stalk.

ligule: a membrane between the leaf blade and stalk

panicle: branched cluster of flowers, and later, seeds

“toothy”: the texture of a leaf surface such that when the leaf is held loosely between the thumb and index finger the thumb slides easily up but not down the leaf.

## Side-Oats Grama

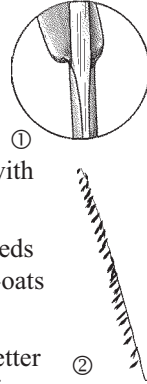
*Bouteloua curtipendula*

2' tall.

The “tuxedo” junction (①) technically includes a ligule, but the wire-thin plant stalk is so small this detail is virtually undetectable, often even with a magnifying glass.

The arrangement of the seeds on the seedhead give side-oats grama its name. (②)

This grass is probably a better specimen of the Great Plains short grass prairie than the tall grass prairie.



And finally, prairie grass plants, like many prairie plants, often show significant variation from one plant to the next. And the plants (and the details of what they look like) change dramatically throughout the growing season. Ligules and auricles that are fairly evident early in the season, for example, may dry up and disappear later in the season. Many times a single specimen may not be very useful, but several specimens from a clump of grass may offer more clues than the single one.

The illustrations of junction characteristics in this booklet are of fairly early-in-the-season specimens. The junctions may not look this way by late summer or fall. The illustrations of flowers/seedheads, on the other hand, are of plants in the late summer or fall.

Perhaps a word is in order about cord-grass or sloughgrass, the 6' tall grass

found in wetland environments similar to that of cattails. In very dense stands this grass often does not flower, but can usually be identified from its context alone. This grass has razor sharp leaves, as anyone who tries to walk through it will discover. Needless to say, the popular and scientific names notwithstanding, forget about the folklore or other suggestions that this grass is good for weaving or making cordage. It is best appreciated from a distance.

If you have any comments, corrections or suggestions about this booklet, please contact Jim Fay at jimfay7@gmail.com.

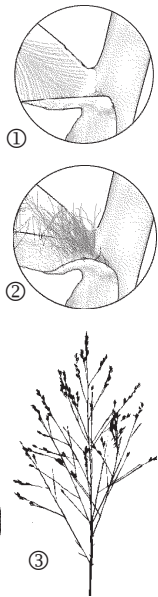
## Switchgrass

*Panicum virgatum*

5' tall.

The junction has an inverted V-shaped pattern of very fine light colored hairs (①) that become a tuft of very fine white fuzz. (②)

Sometimes called “panic grass” for its very large, open panicle. (③) Reddish-purple flowers and tear drop shaped seed. (④)



## Little Bluestem

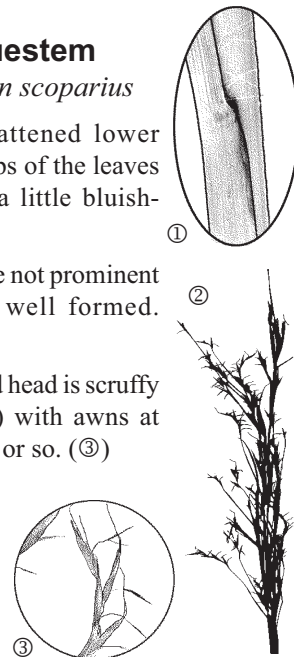
*Andropogon scoparius*

4' tall. Flattened lower stem. The tips of the leaves often have a little bluish-purple twist.

Junctions are not prominent or tight or well formed. (①)

The 10” seed head is scruffy looking (②) with awns at the last inch or so. (③)

The seed head is often virtually covered with fuzzy white down.

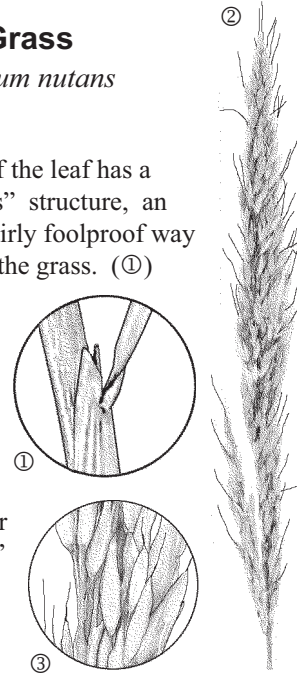


## Indian Grass

*Sorghastrum nutans*

6' tall.

The base of the leaf has a “rabbit ears” structure, an easy and fairly foolproof way to identify the grass. (①) The 10” long seed head is dense and heavy (②) with fairly conspicuous awns or “whiskers.” (③)



## Bottlebrush Grass

*Elymus hystrix*

5' tall. Often in partial sun to light shade.

“Wrap-around” or “collar” ligule that ends in claw-like auricles or “ears” that clasp the stem (①), although all these features (or any of these features, for that matter) may not be apparent after early spring.

Distinctive “bottlebrush” seedhead. (②)

