

Ventenata

What it is

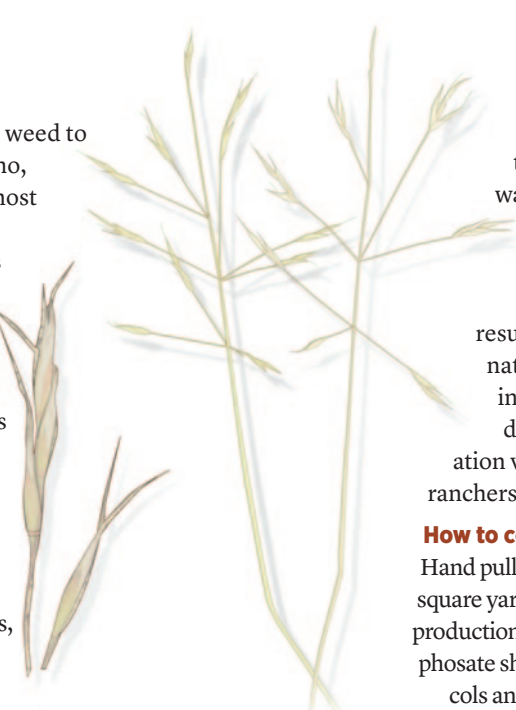
Ventenata is the most recent noxious weed to invade Montana—this time from Idaho, Washington, and Wyoming (unlike most invasives, which arrive from Eastern states). Also known as wiregrass, this spindly winter annual with scrawny stems grows 6 to 18 inches tall and thrives in open disturbed areas and along roadsides, creating what look like parched overgrown weed patches having a bad hair day.

Where it's found in Montana

Most ventenata is in the counties bordering Idaho and Wyoming, where it's taking over moist areas of grasslands, shrub steppes, woodlands, open forests, pastures, hayfields, and croplands.

Why we hate it

This noxious weed crowds out native vegetation. Because it contains silica, wildlife won't eat it. It can also reduce forage available to livestock by 70 percent and reduce crop yields on ag land. The plants increase fire risk because, like the equally loathsome cheat-



grass, they dry out long before native and domestic perennial grasses do and sit there like tinder waiting to ignite from lightning or rail car sparks.

How it spreads

A winter annual, ventenata emerges in the fall, overwinters as a seedling and resumes growth in the spring before desired native vegetation sprouts, and then matures early in the grazing season. Each ventenata plant produces up to 35 seeds, which spread via recreation vehicles, hikers, and pets, and as farmers and ranchers move hay and livestock from infested fields.

How to control it

Hand pulling works with small infestations of less than a few square yards. Mowing can in some cases help prevent seed production. Herbicides like indaziflam, imazapic, and glyphosate show some promise. Proper seed-cleaning protocols and equipment cleaning practices can significantly reduce the unintentional spread of this invasive grass.

If you see what looks like ventenata, report it to Jasmine Chaffee, Montana Department of Agriculture Noxious Weed Program manager, at 406-444-3140. ■

LIZ BRADFORD

THE MICRO MANAGER

A quick look at a concept or term commonly used in fisheries, wildlife, or state parks management.

“Habitat fragmentation”

To survive and thrive, wildlife need to live where they can find food, raise their young, escape predators, survive winter, and fulfill other survival requirements. These places are known as habitat. One of the biggest threats to habitat—and the wildlife living there—is fragmentation.

Fragmentation happens when habitats are cut into smaller pieces. A common example is a new road built through a grassland or forest. Though the road's physical footprint is relatively small compared to the area it cuts through, the harm to wildlife populations can be enormous.

For most wildlife species, the smaller the habitat parcel, the harder it is to survive. Small animals may be unable to cross a road to reach water or breeding areas. Larger animals might shy away from a new road and traffic, disrupting their ability to migrate. Fencing, housing, mining, and oil and gas drilling also can break up habitat.

Some carnivores such as red foxes and skunks thrive in fragmented habitat, because it offers more “edge cover” they can patrol in search of ground-nesting birds and small mammals. But sometimes even these predators suffer as their prey base declines. ■



New roads break large expanses of habitat into smaller parcels that many wildlife species struggle to use or access.

SHUTTERSTOCK