

# READING THE WEST

read-ing [from ME reden, to explain, hence to read] - vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

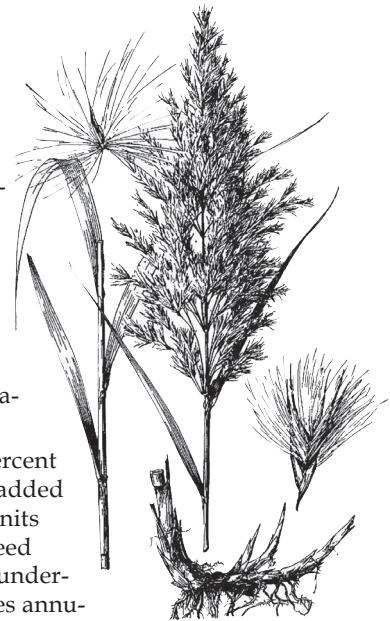
## PHRAGS

One of the most invasive plant species in Utah is *Phragmites australis*. It has taken over much of the wetlands along the Wasatch Front. *Phragmites* was introduced from Europe over a century ago and is now found in all fifty states and on every continent except Antarctica.

Particularly troublesome is their takeover of the Bear River Bird Refuge. They produce millions of seeds, but these seeds really aren't a source of food for a vast majority of the estimated ten million migratory birds. And the species doesn't attract the types of bugs that the birds feast on in the spring.

The saltwater flooding of the 1980s at the Refuge killed numerous freshwater plant species and left open, disturbed ground. New, more invasive *phragmites* began to take hold. A control plan was issued in 2007 which allowed herbicide application and prescribed burning.

By 2014, officials estimated *phragmites* had taken over ten percent of the 77,000-acre bird refuge. By then, cattle grazing had been added as a treatment strategy. Cattle are now placed within infested units during prime growing season to reduce plant growth, reduce seed head formation and trample the rhizomes (shallow, horizontal underground roots). The refuge has grazed approximately 10,000 acres annually, split among three operators.



*Phragmites australis*. Hitchcock, A.S. *Manual of the grasses of the United States*. USDA Miscellaneous Publication No. 200, 1950.

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Source: Olson, Bridget E. *Phragmites Control Plan*. Interior Department, Fish and Wildlife Service, 2007. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-I49-PURL-LPS108270/pdf/GOVPUB-I49-PURL-LPS108270.pdf>.

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Source: Gurrister, Tim. "DWR. Migratory Bird Refuge to Take Flight in Fight Against Phragmites." *GephardtDaily*, 1 Aug. 2022, <https://gephardtaily.com/uncategorized/brmbr-takes-to-the-air-in-phragmite-fight/>.

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Source: "Grazing Opportunities at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge." *U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service*, 2022, <https://www.fws.gov/service/grazing-opportunities-bear-river-migratory-bird-refuge>.

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Source: Williams, Carter. "'It's a battle': Why There's a Growing Fight to Stop Phragmites around the Great Salt Lake." *KSL.com*, 20 Sept. 2022, <https://www.ksl.com/article/50478913/its-a-battle-why-theres-a-growing-fight-to-stop-phragmites-around-the-great-salt-lake>.

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Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service *Phragmites Management for Improving Bear River Delta and Associated Wetland*, Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative, 2023. <https://wri.utah.gov/wri/reports/ProjectSummaryReport.html?id=6089>

## INVASIVE GRASS IN MAUI

According to a recent report in *Smithsonian Magazine*, one factor which made the August 2023 fires in Maui so deadly were invasive grasses. As sugar cane and pineapple agriculture declined, vast swaths of farming acreage were abandoned. Nonnative plants such as guinea grass, molasses grass, and buffelgrass moved in.

*These species are native to Africa and were introduced to Hawaii in the late 18th century by European ranchers who wanted a steady supply of drought-resistant livestock forage. Today, almost a quarter of Hawaii's land cover consists of these invasive shrubs. They run amok on the tens of thousands of acres of plantations on which sugar cane and pineapple plants once flourished. Hardy, voracious and opportunistic, they invade roadside shoulders and encroach on urban housing areas.*

*"Those fire-prone invasive species fill in any gaps anywhere else – roadsides, in between communities, in between people's homes, all over the place," [said] Elizabeth Pickett, co-executive director of the Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization....*

*... [A] good first step for fire mitigation is to reduce the fuel for future blazes. That means reverting the overrun plantations back into tended agricultural lands. Grazing animals can also be valuable allies to tamp down these invasive grasses. This method is as simple as letting sheep, cattle or goats do what they do best on grass-dominated spaces, so they can trim the unruly kindling.*

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Source: Kim, Shi En. "How Swaths of Invasive Grass Made Maui's Fires so Devastating." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 15 Aug. 2023, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-swaths-of-invasive-grass-made-maui-fires-so-devastating-180982729/>.

## WIREFRASS AND FORESTS

*Ventenata dubia* or wiregrass is native to countries surrounding the Mediterranean. It is now invading northwestern forests. It is one of several grasses reshaping ecosystems and wildfire around the world. Buffelgrass feeds fires in the Sonoran Desert that torch saguaro cacti. In the Great Basin, fire-tolerant cheatgrass is crowding out sagebrush.

In a report for *Science*, Warren Cornwall notes that even in scablands – rocky patches of open terrain – wiregrass is spreading. Compared with cheatgrass, wiregrass can colonize cooler, higher elevation locations and take root in thinner soils. Researchers say that,

*... although Ventenata doesn't fare well in dense shade, it can encroach on forest edges, where it fuels fires that clear parts of the overstory, letting in more sunlight. Computer simulations suggest that cycle could gradually shrink forests, [Becky] Kerns [ecologist at USFS'S Pacific Northwest Research Station] says, like waves eroding a beach.*

*That scenario was a revelation, and not a welcome one. Historically, Kerns says, land managers in the western United States have thought of invasive grasses as a problem for wide-open rangelands. But modeling suggests wiregrass could creep into many forests in eastern Oregon, as well as those in dry, higher mountains as far south as Arizona and New Mexico. "Ventenata has really challenged a lot of our notions about invasive grasses in the West," she says.*

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Source: Cornwall, Warren. "Fiery Invasions, Around the World, Flammable Invasive Grasses are Increasing the Risk of Damaging Wildfires." *Science*, 4 Aug. 2023, <https://www.science.org/content/article/flammable-invasive-grasses-increasing-risk-devastating-wildfires>.

## HORRIBLE HOLLY

Steven Hsieh recently reported in *High Country News* about efforts to poison *Ilex aquifolium*, or English holly, which is invading the Pacific Northwest. Much of that effort has been

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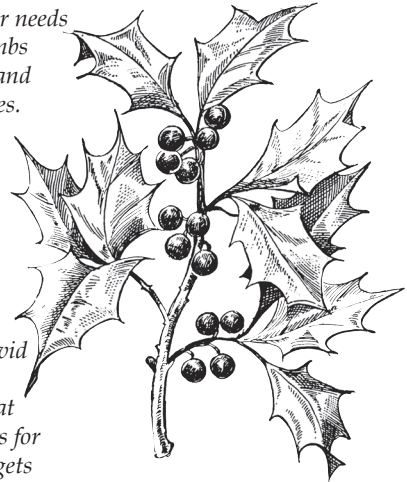
stymied by holly growers lobbying the Washington State Farm Bureau to ban any commercially grown crop from being listed as a weed.

*Under human control, holly can be shaped and shifted to meet our needs for beauty and privacy. Cut through a holly stem, and several new limbs will eventually emerge. Wander through a Northwest neighborhood, and you might see holly hedges meticulously shaped into sharp-edged boxes.*

*Some of the same qualities that make holly such a desirable landscaping plant also make it a ruthless invader. It can live for a century, withstand considerable damage and thrive in the shade. It also reproduces prolifically; many parts of one tree can make new hollies. . . .*

*No one has calculated how much public money has been spent controlling holly in the Northwest. Washington State Parks spent more than \$30,000 removing holly at St. Edward State Park after David Stokes studied that invasion. When Sally Nickelson, the former invasive species manager for Seattle Public Utilities, discovered the holly at Lake Youngs, the agency approved around \$90,000 of taxpayer dollars for control work. Those efforts – and many more tucked within local budgets and contracts – merely snip at an exponentially branching problem.*

*Even when holly hunters do defeat an invasion, keeping new hollies out requires constant vigilance and optimism.*



English holly, [https://etc.usf.edu/cli-part/25800/25821/holly\\_25821.htm](https://etc.usf.edu/cli-part/25800/25821/holly_25821.htm).

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Hsieh, Steven. "Horrible Holly: A Festive Plant Runs Amok." *High Country News*, 1 Dec. 2023, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/55.12/plants-horrible-holly-a-festive-plant-runs-amok>.

## ICONIC TUMBLEWEED

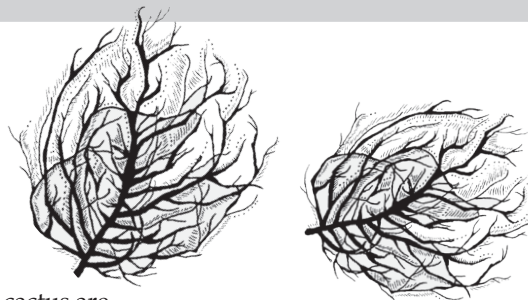
*See them tumbling down*

*Pledging their love to the ground*

*Lonely but free I'll be found*

*Drifting along with the tumblin' tumbleweeds*

– Bob Nolan, 1930



Tumbleweed, wind witch, and Russian cactus are among the many common names for the Russian thistle (*Salsola tragus*), which became an icon of the Old West featured in movies and songs. Russian thistle is highly invasive in North America. It has followed in the wake of agriculture and other human activities since the late 1800s and its ability to spread prolifically makes it a threat to ecosystems, human health, and the economy. As the Natural History Museum in London put it:

*The Russian thistle made its first known appearance in North America in the 1870s, in Bonhomme County, South Dakota. . . .*

*Farmers were among the first to notice its arrival. Russian thistle is an expert at exploiting loose, disturbed soil with little competing vegetation. This is exactly what it found in the ploughed land of the Great Plains. As pioneer farmers cut down prairie grasses and other native vegetation to make space for crops, they created a suitable habitat for the invasive Russian thistle.*

*As Russian thistle matures, it goes from a soft seedling to a stiff and spiny plant. Its defences put off grazing animals, but also inflicted wounds on farmers, their horses and livestock. In some areas,*

*infestations grew to the point that ploughing became impossible and there were extensive crop losses worth millions of dollars.*

*The plant also affected native vegetation and wildlife, preventing them from thriving in infested areas. . . .*

*The arrival and spread of Russian thistle is considered to be one of the fastest plant invasions in the history of the United States. Today the plant is found in all states except Alaska and Florida.*

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Source: Osterloff, Emily. "Tumbleweeds: the Fastest Plant Invasion in the USA's History." *Natural History Museum*, <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/tumbleweeds-fastest-plant-invasion-in-usa-history.html>.

#### EDITORIAL MATTER

ISSN 0891-8899 – Weber is published biannually by The College of Arts & Humanities at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah 84408-1405. Full text of this issue and historical archives are available in electronic edition at <https://www.weber.edu/weberjournal>

Indexed in: Abstracts of English Studies, Humanities International Complete, Index of American Periodical Verse, MLA International Bibliography, and Sociological Abstracts. Member, Council of Learned Journals.

Subscription Costs: Individuals \$20 (outside U.S., \$30), institutions \$30 (outside U.S., \$40). Back issues \$10 subject to availability. Multi-year and group subscriptions also available.

Submissions and Correspondence: Editor, **WEBER | THE CONTEMPORARY WEST** | Weber State University  
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