



Lake County, Illinois, USA

Lake County Seed Collection Guide

Summer Wetland Grasses and Kin

Kelly Schultz¹, Dale Shields²

¹Lake County Forest Preserve District, ²Volunteer Stewardship Network

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The pictures in this guide were assembled to help restoration volunteers identify ripe seeds of native species. The squares are 1” on a side in the indoor shots with white squares on the gray background. The seed shots are on a metric scale (mm divisions). Names used are those of Flora of the Chicago Region by Gerould Wilhelm and Laura Rericha. Our heartfelt thanks go to Laurie Ryan of the McHenry County Conservation District for her review.

Harvest notes

Successful collection of viable seed requires an understanding of when to collect, how to collect, how to store, how to process, and when to sow. Determine these criteria and have a plan before harvesting seeds, especially of uncommon species. The species are listed in order of the photo dates, so will give an approximate time for collection, but collection dates vary according to local weather effects on blooming and pollinators; proximity to Lake Michigan; slopes; sun vs shade, etc. Many seed harvest charts are available with collection dates, but it is best to scout each site rather than relying on historic dates.

Seeds collected before mid-June should be sown right away. They are intolerant of dry storage and most of them require both warm & cold treatments to stimulate germination. Late June seeds are more tolerant of dry storage; sow these seeds soon, but you can let them dry for a few weeks. Seeds ripening July and later can be held for fall/winter sowing, sow by Jan 1st for best results.

Collect ethically & sustainably. Everything is protected in forest preserves, including seeds. Collection is only allowed by staff and volunteers in our restoration programs. If you are collecting within those programs, it is important to avoid overharvesting wild populations. For perennials: **leave 50% behind.** For annuals, biennials, rare, threatened, or endangered species: **collect only 10% of the seed.**

Shattering seeds can be tough to visually judge for ripeness. Use a *gentle* touch test to see if the seeds easily loosen. Spring seeds remain green (perhaps for camouflage) and swell slightly. Fall seeds typically turn brown or beige when ripe. Often found in colonies, these seeds do not travel far on their own. Some of these species drop quickly & are not Mama’s Boys.



Do Not Collect. This symbol is placed on images of non-native & invasive native seeds, which have been included as comparisons for similar native species. Do not collect these species, unless you are collecting for removal.



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Grasses and kin include plants in the Grass Family (Poaceae), Rush Family (Juncaceae), and Sedge Family (Cyperaceae). All of these species have long narrow, parallel-veined leaves and are wind-pollinated. These species are typically identified by their seeds, so any field guide of these species is essentially a seed guide. Check for ripeness with the “touch test” – if they are loose, then they are ripe. Strip by hand or snip stalks.

Cyperaceae (Sedge Family). *Sedges have edges*: stems are typically triangular, and the edges can be felt by rolling in your fingers. Leaves are 3-ranked: each leaf exits from a different side of the triangle, rotating around the stem. Some species have round solid stems, but are not jointed like grasses. Single seed in each flowering scale. The sheath is closed on the side opposite the leaf blade. The biggest group is the genus *Carex*, which has a single seed in a papery pouch called a perigynium. Other members of this family have naked seeds and go by common names such as bulrush, woolgrass, spike rush, nut rush, nut sedge, etc. Sedges are very tough to ID. The good news: very few sedges are bad, you can always collect a “woodland sedge mix.” Consult a sedge guide for ID; this guide is intended to highlight a few quick notes.



Juncaceae (Rush Family). *Rushes are round*: stems are typically round & solid. Some have flattened stems, but they are not jointed. Typically unbranched, simple stems. Three or more seeds in a three-sided capsule. Flower parts come in threes and sixes, most flowers are perfect, having both stamens and pistils. Leaves are thread-like or flat & linear. Many of our common species are relatively short (about knee-high), and appear delicately wiry. Common species include path rush, Dudley’s rush, and soft rush.



Poaceae (Grass Family). *Grasses are straws, with holes to the ground*: stems are typically round & hollow, like a reed. Some species have flattened stems. Grasses have jointed stems; the joints are called nodes and the stem is solid at that point. There is a single seed in each flowering scale. Leaves are 2-ranked, with each leaf exiting the stem on the opposite side of the one below. The sheaths are open or split on the opposite side from the leaf blade. Grasses can be 1-2’ tall (like poverty oat grass & June grass) or head height (like big bluestem) or even basketball player tall (like the invasive *Phragmites*).



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Common Fox Sedge

Carex stipata

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: VULPINAE

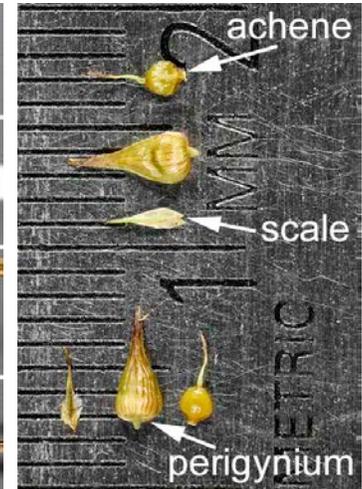


Photo: 6-12-19

Common sedge of wet habitats, aka awl-fruited sedge, referring to the long beak. Fox sedges tend to resemble bushy fox tails, with densely clustered pointed seeds. This species has rugose (wrinkly) sheaths. Stems are thick, but easily compressed.

Narrow-leaved Oval Sedge

Carex tenera

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: OVALES



Photo: 6-19-17

One of the "Oh no - Oval sedges!" Wide leaves, less than 3 mm wide, and look for some separation between the spikelets (pinecones of seed). The spike is often nodding or arched at harvest time. Perigynia, pistillate scales, and sheaths are useful to ID from other oval sedges.

Common Tussock Sedge

Carex stricta

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: PHACOCYSTIS



Photo: 6-29-18

As this name says, this species is common and forms tussocks (mounds, like prairie dropseed) that are easily discovered while tripping your way through a wetland. Seeds are small and tightly packed; initially green with brown scales before ripening to a light brown. Most spikes are staminate at the tip. Lowest leaf sheaths disintegrate to look like the laces of a boot, or a rope net. Easily crumbles by hand.

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Small-seeded Fox Sedge

Carex annectens var.
xanthocarpa

CYPERACEAE

CAREX:
MULTIFLORAE



Photo: 6-27-18

Happiest in full sun & damp places but can grow in part shade & mesic soils. Seeds are small & yellow, sheaths are wrinkly. Seeds are slightly smaller & spikes are slightly shorter than the straight species *C. annectens*. The variety *xanthocarpa* is more common in the region.

Brown Fox Sedge

Carex vulpinoidea

CYPERACEAE

CAREX:
MULTIFLORAE



Photo: 8-8-2017

C. vulpinoidea is similar to *C. annectens* but leaf blades are similar height or taller than fruiting stems; the 2 varieties of *C. annectens* typically have fruiting stems taller than leaf blades. *C. vulpinoidea* typically has a more prominent bract at the base of the spikelet, the spikes are often more than 5.5 cm long, and the perigynia have longer beaks relative to the winged body.

Prairie Woolly Sedge

Carex pellita

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: PALUDOSAE



Photo: 7-3-19

One of the granular-seeded sedges, notable for its woolly (like peach fuzz) perigynia. Perigynium color is variable – pale green, yellow, or purplish before drying to a muted brown. Consult leaves & perigynia size. Common in wetlands and plays well with other natives.

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Running Prairie Sedge

Carex sartwellii

CYPERACEAE

CAREX:
HOLARRHENAE

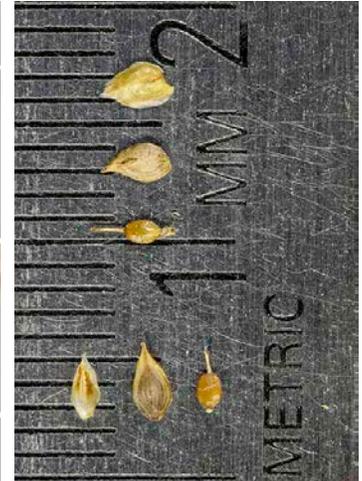


Photo: 7-3-19

A rhizomatous species of full sun wetlands. Isolated stalks sprout up from the creeping roots, and there are more sterile stalks than fertile ones. Most sedge species are clumping or grow in dense mats; the single stalks are a key feature to narrow down the ID.

Dark-scaled Sedge

Carex buxbaumii

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: RACEMOSAE

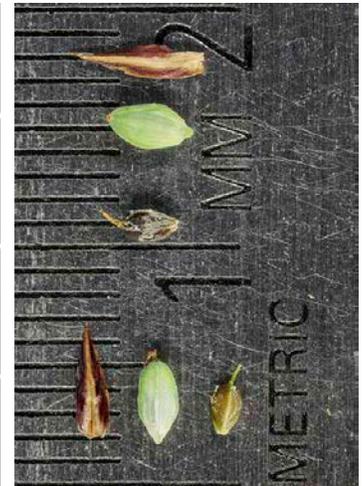


Photo: 7-4-19

Plump mint chocolate chip spikelets: pale green seed interspersed with dark chocolate scales. ID can be fairly certain from spikes alone, but can be confirmed by rhizomes, stem bases, and leaf width. Old seeds may turn brown.

Brome Tussock Sedge

Carex bromoides

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: DEWEYANAE

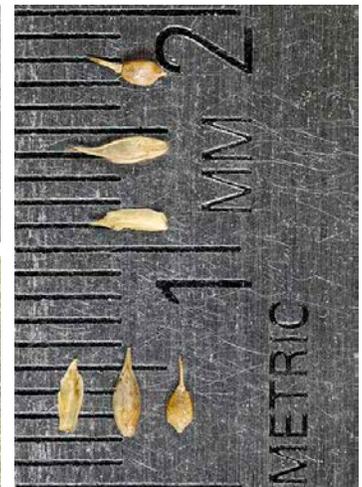
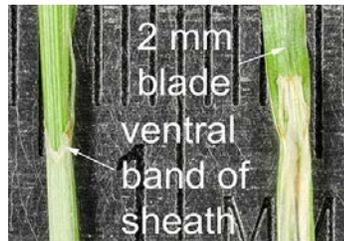


Photo: 7-8-19

State threatened, abundant in flatwoods. Forms tussocks (mounds) like *C. stricta*, but a shorter stature plant and seeds are clearly different – thin lance-shaped perigynia. Sheaths have curved thickened hyaline (translucent) bands. Hyaline features of native plants are typically translucent off-white, like a fingernail.

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Common Lake Sedge

Carex lacustris

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: PALUDOSAE

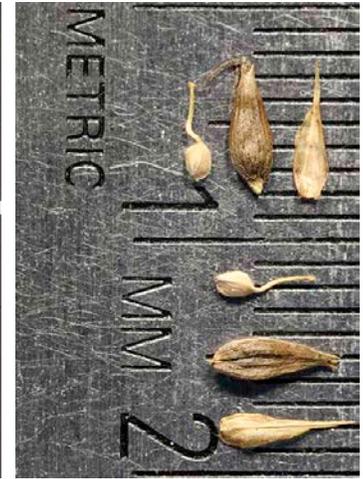


Photo: 7-12-20

Common in wetlands. Plants are tall (often 1 meter or taller), completely hairless, and form dense colonies. Leaves are wide (1-2 cm wide). Sheath is reddish (when fresh) and has a fibrous ladder pattern. The ligule (where the leaf meets the stem) is taller than wide, like a church steeple. Perigynia have a gentle taper and a small beak with tiny teeth. It is so effective at spreading by rhizomes that seeds are uncommon.

Southern Lake Sedge

Carex hyalinolepis

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: PALUDOSAE

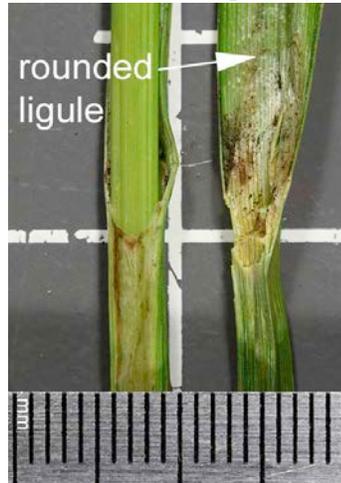


Photo: 7-5-20

A new record for the county and new species addition to Flora. Likely present in other preserves and incorrectly identified as *C. lacustris*. These 2 *Carex* are very similar. This species has evergreen blades in winter and spikes of seeds are longer. Ligule (the inside of the collar) is rounded rather than pointed; leaf sheath is generally not ladder-like. The observed population produced many fruiting stalks.

Crowfoot Fox Sedge

Carex crus-corvi

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: VULPINAE



Photo: 7-24-19

A rare *Carex* with unique seeds that can't be mistaken: extra-long beaks & an abrupt cap at the base of each perigynium. A dense, bristly spike, like other fox sedges. Loves flatwoods and edges of ephemeral ponds.

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Narrow-leaved Cattail Sedge

Carex squarrosa

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: SQUARROSAE



Photo: 8-1-17

Another unique *Carex*. Look for spikey eggs, usually one egg per stalk. Stalks are usually upright. Similar *Carex* species have spikelets that are cucumbers rather than egg-shaped, often nodding. Likes shady edges of standing water. Crumbles when ripe; collect by hand or snip.

Crested Oval Sedge

Carex cristatella

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: OVALES

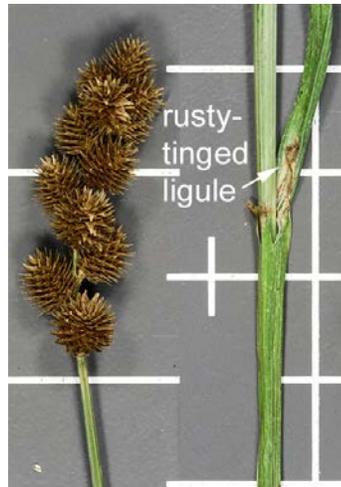


Photo: 8-5-17

Another tough-to-ID oval sedge. Tightly packed bristly & round oval spikelets (the pinecone-like clusters of seeds). Found in full sun to medium shade. The roundness of the spikelets and the number of spikelets are fairly indicative, but consult sheath characteristics to be sure.

Broom Oval Sedge

Carex scoparia

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: OVALES

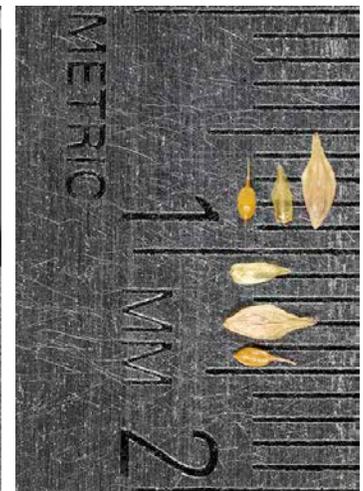


Photo: 8-7-19

Another oval sedge with crowded spikelets, but these have pointed oval spikelets. Another name is pointed broom sedge. Note the skinny leaf blades that are shorter than the main stem. Leaf blade midrib is a ridge on the side away from the stem, and the sheath has a thin translucent band at the summit. Typically full sun, wet to moist conditions. Crumbles easily when ripe, collect by hand or snip stalks.

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Awl-fruited Oval Sedge

Carex tribuloides

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: OVALES



Photo: 8-8-17

Aka blunt broom sedge. Resembles *C. scoparia*, but this species has blunter, less pointed spikelets. Leafy stems, loose sheaths, and the number of perigynia per spikelet will help with ID. Grows in marshes & flatwoods. Crumbles easily when ripe, collect by hand or snip stalks.

Porcupine Sedge

Carex hystericina

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: VESICARIAE



Photo: 8-8-17

A prickly cucumber of seeds that may poke into your skin (gloves recommended for collecting). Perigynia are slightly inflated. Pedicels (the 'petiole' or stalk to the spikelet) are shorter than other similar prickly cucumber sedges; spikelets are also shorter (fewer perigynia per spikelet). Perigynia are yellow to brown when ripe; spikelet crumbles easily.

Shining Bur Sedge

Carex intumescens

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: LUPULINAE



Photo: 8-10-18

State threatened. One of the big "super sedges" – the large perigynia are similarly sized to the common *C. grayi* & *C. lupulina*. Spikelets have only a few seeds, often looks like 1/3 of the *C. grayi* "medieval mace." Perigynia are in a cylindrical or round-cylindrical arrangement, and beaks point out or up, never down.

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Swamp Oval Sedge

Carex muskingumensis

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: OVALES



Photo: 8-17-19

A unique-looking oval sedge (hooray!): the perigynia are unusually long, the spikelets are long & pointed, and the plants are leafy & palm-like (aka palm sedge). Leaves arranged like a spiral staircase, clearly in 3 ranks when viewed from above. Loves floodplain forests.

Deflexed Bottlebrush Sedge

Carex retrorsa

CYPERACEAE

CAREX: VESICARIAE

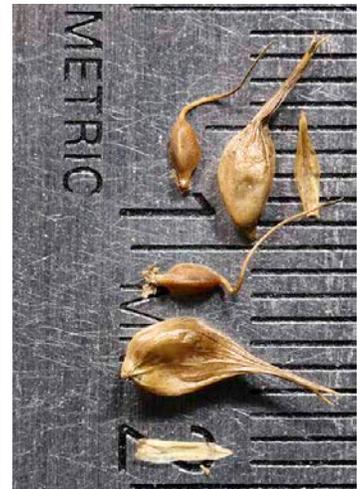


Photo: 8-17-20

Somewhat similar to *C. hystericina*, but taller plants (1 m), and the lowest perigynia reflex, with beaks pointing towards the ground. Spikes of seeds have tiny peduncle stalks; most are essentially sessile but occasionally one has a short stalk. Wet prairies & woodlands.

Green Yellow Sedge

Carex viridula

CYPERACEAE

CAREX:
CERATOCYSTIS

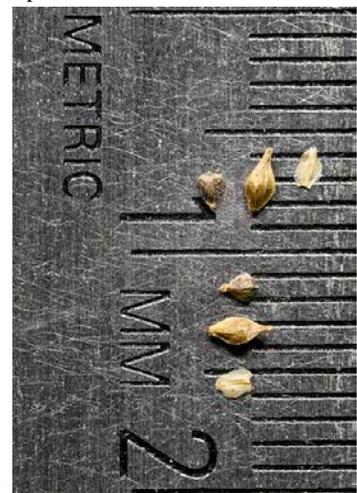


Photo: 8-21-20

This state threatened species is found in fens and the swales & pannes near Lake Michigan. Petite, often ankle- to shin-high. Similar to *C. cryptolepis*. Fruits are generally green or beige when ripe, rather than yellow-green. Use the touch test to determine if ripe. Perigynia are smaller, 3 mm or less (vs. 4.5 – 5 mm long for *C. cryptolepis*).

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River Bulrush

Bolboschoenus fluviatilis

CYPERACEAE



Photo: 8-1-18

This big beautiful beast densely fills in wetlands and has a mixed reputation due to its aggressive nature. Do not use in delicate sedge meadows, but well suited for wetlands challenged with cattails & *Phragmites*. Big spikelets with big seeds that will fall out when crumbled. Collect by hand or snip stalks & process against a sturdy screen.

Reddish Bulrush

Scirpus microcarpus

CYPERACEAE

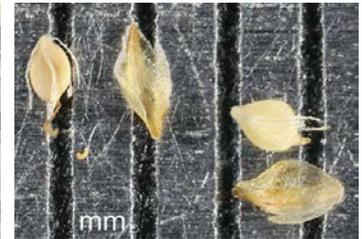


Photo: 7-30-19

This state endangered species superficially resembles the common *S. atrovirens*, but *S. microcarpus* is typically knee-high, and clusters are more open & pale brown. Sheaths are reddish-purple; the alternating bands of green & purple inspired the other name of barber pole sedge.

Red Bulrush

Scirpus pendulus

CYPERACEAE



Photo: 8-7-19

As the Latin name indicates, these seeds like to dangle. Often found in ditches, meadows, disturbed wet margins, and former mowed trails. Sheaths are yellow-green to straw-colored. Check out floral scales, bright yellow-green foliage, and round stalk. Crumbles easily when ripe.

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Dark Green Rush

Scirpus atrovirens

CYPERACEAE

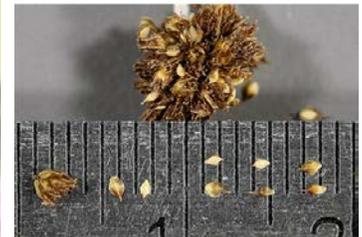


Photo: 8-13-18

An ultra-common, hearty wetland native. Clusters are dark-chocolate brown, and crumble when ripe to release tiny beige seeds. Collect by hand and crumble, or snip and crush against a screen.

Chairmaker's Rush

Schoenoplectus pungens

CYPERACEAE



Photo: 8-15-17

Chairmaker's rush has a small pop of spikelets sticking out from the side of the stem near the peak of the stalk. Stems are strongly 3-angled, almost winged in cross-section, with concave sides between the ridged edges. Brown & crumbly when ripe; collect by hand & crumble or snip stalks & process against a screen. This is one of several rush species historically woven to create chair seats.

Great Bulrush

Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani

CYPERACEAE



Photo: 8-15-17

Formerly known as soft-stem bulrush, this species is often found in standing water and in dense stands. Stems are easily compressed with a gentle squeeze. Spikelets typically less than twice as long as broad (less than 10mm long); achenes typically less than 2.1 mm long.

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Red-rooted Spikerush

Eleocharis erythropoda

CYPERACEAE

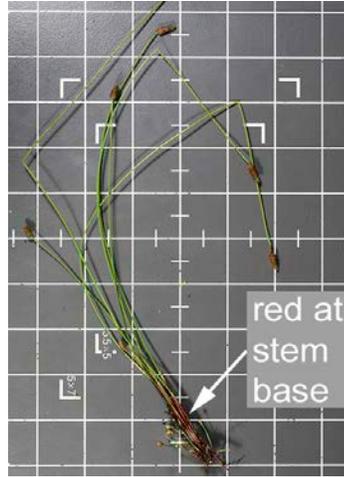


Photo 8-16-18

Eleocharis are tough to ID, but you can comfortably collect any of them since all of the local species are native (per *Flora* & USDA plants). Many species form rhizomatous lawns in wetlands, with short pineapple-shaped spikes at the tip. ID by examining width of stems, roots, achene tubercle (cap on top of the seed), bristles (rough hairs sprouting from the seed base), and scales (at the base & middle of the spikelet).

Soft Rush

Juncus effusus

JUNCACEAE



Photo: 7-30-19

This species grows in full sun to part shade, moist to wet conditions. Look for a bouquet of florets shooting out from the side of the stem (most *Juncus* have bouquets pointing up to the sky). 3-parted capsules open to release tiny seeds. Nine varieties listed on USDA, but only the straight species is recognized in this area. Snip stalks with open capsules, seeds are small enough to pass through no-see-um mesh.

Dudley's Rush

Juncus dudleyi

JUNCACEAE



Photo: 8-8-18

This common species grows in many wetlands. Florets point up to the sky. 3-parted capsules are shorter than the pointed tepals, and open to release tiny (0.5 mm long) seeds. Leaf blades are shorter than the flowering stalks. Sheaths have a thick, blunt auricle (ear-like collar).

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Joint Rush

Juncus nodosus

JUNCACEAE



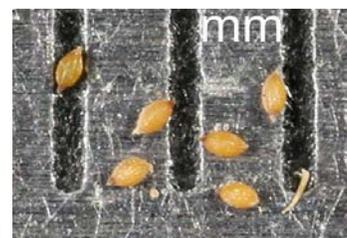
Photo: 8-16-18

Little pom-poms on short stalks, containing teeny tiny seeds. Similar to several other species: compare the number of flowers per pom-pom (8-20) and the diameter of the pom-pom (6-12 mm). Note the rusty-red capsules are longer than the beige sepals. Once in a while, super-sized florets (2-3x longer) will emerge from the pom-pom; these are reportedly galls caused by hymenoptera larva.

Torrey's Rush

Juncus torreyi

JUNCACEAE



Photos: 8-10-18
8-30-19

Little pom-poms on short stalks, containing teeny tiny seeds. Similar to other species: note the densely packed head with 25-100 flowers/head. Rusty-red capsules are typically around the same height as the beige sepals.

Canadian Rush

Juncus canadensis

JUNCACEAE

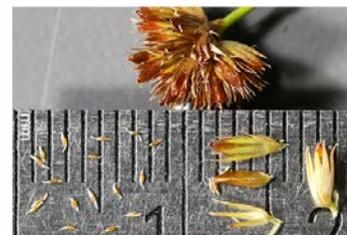


Photo: 9-20-20

One of the little pom-pom rushes but the seeds have a different shape: elliptical, like a banana slug with white tails at both ends. Pom-poms are 3-10 mm in diameter, each with 5-50 flowers. Seeds are 1.2-1.5 mm long. Round heads may be clustered together or separate. See Flora for varieties. This species & similar sisters have a range of blooming & seeding times, harvest summer through fall.

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Sweet Grass

Hierochloë hirta

POACEAE



Photo: 6-17-19

An uncommon grass with a smell similar to sweet black-eyed Susan and the invasive sweet clover. Aka holy grass, the species is braided and used in sacred Native American ceremonies. Strips easily by hand, seeds are a caramel brown when ripe. Seeds are soft; mechanical tools are often too aggressive for these seeds. Unlike most grasses, this one needs stratification to germinate, or perhaps sow fresh.

Blue Joint Grass

Calamagrostis canadensis

POACEAE



Photo: 8-11-19

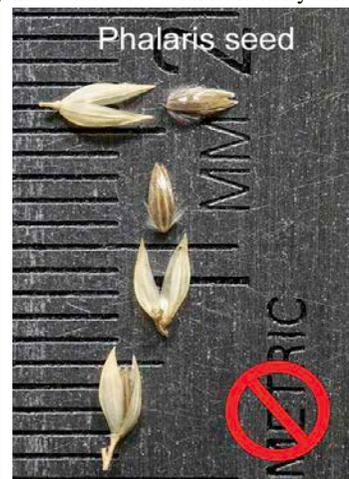
One of the native grasses that was likely abundant before reed canary grass invaded. Plants are blue-green in spring; joints are often blue-purple. Flowers in a Xmas tree shape (like Kentucky bluegrass) but collapses to a slender feather at harvest time. Similar looking to reed canary grass, but this is the delicate gazelle to the bull of RCG – slender stalks & leaves, slender feathery head and seeds with little hairy tufts.

Blue Joint Grass
Calamagrostis canadensis

vs.

Reed Canary Grass
Phalaris arundinacea

POACEAE



The invasive Reed Canary Grass (RCG) and blue joint grow in the same habitat. RCG has much wider leaves. RCG has yellow auricles (wrapped collar of the leaf sheath) aka the “canary’s ear” sometimes with an ear-like bend. Blue joint auricles are green, or blueish/reddish-tinted at the base. The ligule (the leaf sheath’s “popped collar”) of RCG is translucent, tall, and intact; blue joint is typically ragged.

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Floating Manna Grass

Glyceria septentrionalis

POACEAE

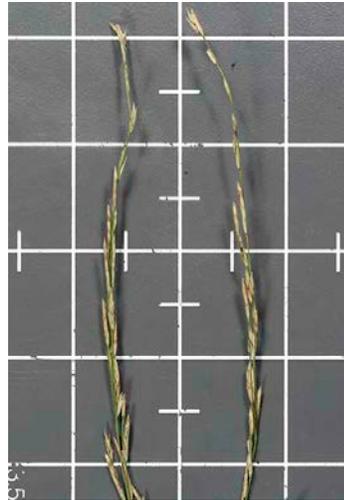


Photo: 8-16-18

This species looks quite different from its more common sister, fowl manna grass. Leaves are wider (up to 12 mm across) and seeds are longer (4-5 mm). Tiny rough hairs (“hispidulous”) are present on the seeds, but not visible without a microscope or lens.