

Ventenata dubia

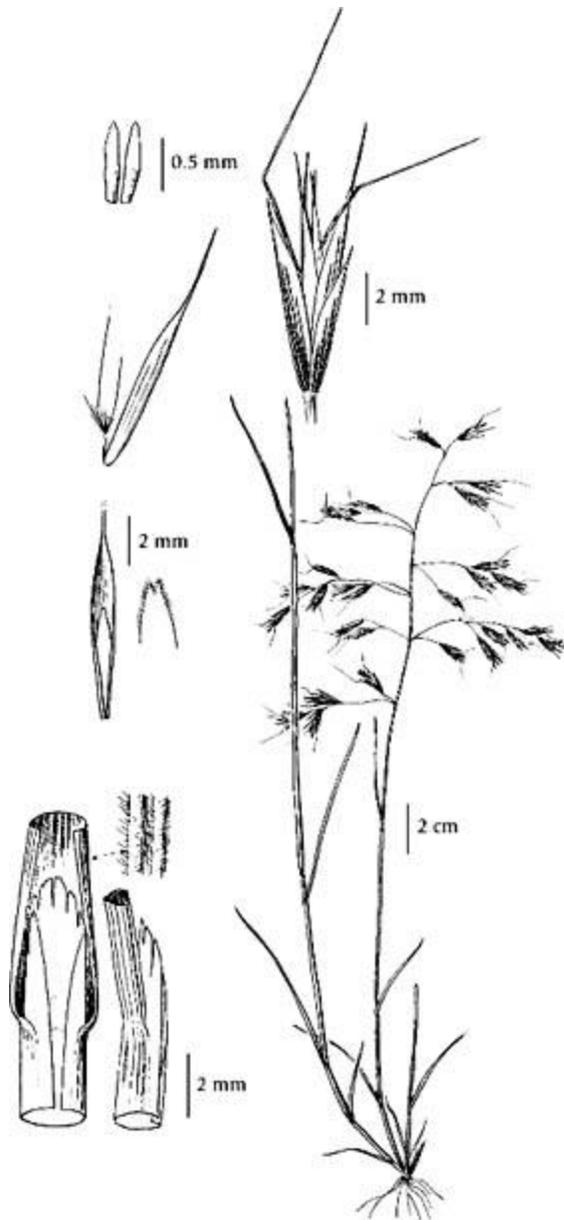
— an Aggressive “Awn grass” is Bad News

By Dorinda Troutman, RMR Staff Writer

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Harold Wadley, long-time friend of Rocky Mountain Rider, writer and maker of traditional braided horse tack, first saw the foreign grass near his home north of St. Maries, Idaho, about six years ago.

“*Ventenata dubia* (“wind grass”) is terrible and spreading in all hayfields and roadsides around here. Wind grass is similar to cheat grass, only taller, and with a more compact seed head. The awns (extremely sharp, pointed, serrated seed heads) go right through a soft cloth shirt. I’ve fought most of it out of the hayfield and always burn any bale that has much showing. Some adjacent fields are covered with it. When green, it is very soft and fine and will gum up a mower!”



Ventenata dubia is known by several common names:

Ventenata, wind grass, North Africa grass, North Africa wiregrass, wiregrass, and hairgrass.

This drawing from the Illustrated Flora of British Columbia shows ventenata seed awns.

Ventenata dubia

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Ventenata dubia* is an annual grass that germinates from seed. It is native to southern Europe, western Asia and northern Africa . It was first reported in the U.S. 1952, in Washington State , and is currently found throughout the northwestern and northeastern states, and western and eastern provinces of Canada .

In the western U.S. , ventenata is beginning to receive a great deal of attention due to its rate of spread and difficulty in control. Ventenata is replacing perennial grasses and forbs in hay, pasture, range and CRP fields in the west. It has minimal value as forage for wildlife and livestock.

Harold Wadley took one of his horses, Kiowa, to an equine dental specialist, Dr. Liz Davies, in Colton , Washington .

“The x-ray showed nothing wrong with his jaws,” explains Harold, “yet he would twist his head sideways a bit and chew as if something was bothering his mouth whenever he saw me coming with hay. I suspected awns from the wind grass.

“Dr. Davies first used small, electric roller grinders on his far back molars to correct a few high points.

“Then she found two small, dime-sized, balls of seed heads at the base of teeth between his incisors and wolf teeth.

“Just how much the wind grass contributed to his specific problem, I don’t know. But I do know when the horses get mouthfuls of green *ventenata*, they chew it and then spit out a wad like beechnut chewing tobacco.”

Dr. Davis sees a lot of awn grasses problems with horses, cattle and dogs. She says, “Awns are just like a needle with their long points. They cause a nasty infection wherever they dig in.

“Also, some animals are more sensitive to them, and have more problems. Some, perhaps Wadley’s horse, Kiowa, will have a severe reaction by just having contact with the abrasive grass and awns.”



Ventenata colonizes disturbed sites in open dry areas. The long naked straight & wiry inflorescences branches diverging at right angles are distinguishing. Photo by Matt Lavin, Montana State University Herbarium Botanist.

Dr. Tim Prather, a specialist on weed ecology at the University of Idaho, says that he began noticing *Ventenata dubia* in the 1980s and, at that time, it was a short grass, about six inches high, with one spikelet. He moved away from Idaho for some years and, when he moved back in 2000, he noticed the plant had become much larger — more like a wild oat — with many spikelets.

“A huge change in size had happened for some unknown reason, and the grass had become very well distributed across the northwest,” says Dr. Prather.

“We have tremendous problems with it now in Idaho . It is replacing cheat grass and medusa head (other invasive, awn-type grasses).

“According to a 2011 survey of grass hay farmers in Idaho ; it has greatly impacted production. Not only is production cut, but farmers cannot export it, so they take a substantial loss.”

Dr. Prather recommends contacting your county extension specialist for help in identification and specific control of *Ventenata dubia* if it is found on your property. Only a couple of herbicides work on it, and seeds remain viable in the soil for up to three years.



Ventenata dubia plant. Photo by Richard Old, www.xidservices.com.

Dr. Richard Old, a weed identification specialist with Washington State University Extension in Pullman and author of “1,000 Weeds of North America,” an interactive software program that can even be taken into the field on an Android phone to aid weed specialists, explained that since ventenata was “already everywhere, it would make lawbreakers out of everyone in the state” if ventenata was put on the noxious weed list in Washington (or Idaho).

When asked about the effects of ventenata on Idaho Certified Noxious Weed Free Forage that is used in the back country, Dan Safford, Noxious Weeds Program Specialist for the State of Idaho, replied that ventenata was not on the noxious weed list in Idaho, and so it was not looked for in a hay field by county weed free certification inspectors.

Safford said that ventenata is very difficult to identify once it is baled with hay. He advised that the only way to ensure that certified weed-free forage did not have ventenata in it is to ask the hay grower if there was any ventenata in the hay field.



Ventenata dubia plants. Photo by Pamela Scheinost, USDA NRCS Pullman Plant Materials Center.

Dr. Jane Mangold, an invasive plant ecologist at Montana State University College of Agriculture Extension in Bozeman , says that ventenata dubia has been spotted growing in only a few smaller areas in Montana so far, and is not yet the problem that it has become in Washington and Idaho .

“It was certainly a hot topic at the annual Western Society of Weed Science conference held in March 2012 in Reno ,” says Dr. Mangold.

Dr. Prather, who had also attended the conference, says that Wyoming weed specialists told him they were vigorously watching for *Ventenata dubia* in Wyoming .

For more information, please consult with your local County Extension Service Weed Specialist.

The US Department of Agriculture has more information on their website. Type in “Ventenata dubia” in the keywords under search.

www.plant-material.nrcs.usda.gov.

Readers, please e-mail editor@rockymountainrider.com if you have experiences with grass awns harming your horses.