

Redseed Plantain  
By Ricky Linex  
Wildlife Biologist, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Redseed plantain is a common cool-season annual forb that can be found across all ten vegetational areas of Texas. There are a baker's dozen of species of plantain across Texas with many spreading out over half or more of the vegetational areas. It is a forb that is comfortable showing up in disturbed areas as well as in any bare areas in good to excellent condition native grasslands. Many ranchers will know this plant as tallow weed owing to its growth during the winter months when other green plants are in short supply and the fact that during wet winters when the plant is prolific it will add fat or tallow to sheep, goats and cattle during the winter and early spring.

Many times we often think the botanical name of a plant, in this case, *Plantago rhodosperma*, is just so much mumbo jumbo. However, many of the plant names reveal traits or quirks about the species. In this case the species name of *rhodosperma* can be broken down with *rhodo* meaning rose-colored which is seen in the reddish seeds while *sperma* is tied to male sperm indicating regeneration of the plant.

I would like to credit my good friend and former writer of Range Plants, Dr. Jake Landers for sharing his knowledge about this plant and others. Several years ago at Dale Rollins retirement roast Jake told me he was someday going to be ready to retire from the Range Plants articles and suggested I might like to write them. I remember hesitating to even think about it and likely gave Jake a noncommittal answer. A little over a year ago he emailed me that the time had come and would I take it over. I was now ready and honored to follow in his footsteps. So I would like to thank Jake for having faith in me and to Gary Cutrer for letting me follow in the very large footsteps of Jake Landers.

Jake was kind enough to share with me several years ago this unusual trait of the seeds of redseed plantain. Collect some seeds by pulling up the matured and dried plant and rub the seedhead between your fingers and catch the seeds that fall out in your other hand. Gently blow away any chaff to have only the reddish seeds remaining. Put the seeds in a small cup and add just enough water to cover the seeds. Within ten minutes a jelly-like layer forms over each of the seeds. Under magnification this has the shape of a boiled egg or of some of the candied Easter eggs, though the covering is clear over the red seeds. You can now pick up the seeds and they will all stick together and will stick to your fingers or to clothing when you try to rug it off your hand. Jake's question was how could this observation help seeds to be moved to a new location? Perhaps, the matured seeds were still within the seedhead until a light rain or wet dew made the jelly-like layer form and would then be picked up by a passing animal as it walked by. The seeds would stick to the legs of the animal and be transported to a new location and then fall off when brushed against vegetation. This was an amazing observation and I encourage you to show it to your kids and grandkids, they will be impressed.

Even earlier the Native Americans, who were acute observers of native plants and their values for food and medicinal uses, made note that wherever the footsteps of the early European travelers and settlers had been the introduced species of plantain, called common plantain or Whiteman's foot would soon be growing. This was due to the disturbance of the ground by heavy grazing of livestock or by early attempts at farming. The genus name of *Plantago* is Latin and was formed from the word *planta* meaning "sole of the foot". This comes from the habits of

the leaves growing outward and lying flat upon the ground. Perhaps this connection to the feet of humans and animals has been known for centuries.

All plantains are readily eaten by native and exotic deer and antelope. Crude protein values range from 12 to 13 percent in December to a high of 20 percent in early February dropping to 8 percent in May. Bobwhite and scaled quail will eat the leaves in late winter when seeds become hard to find and will readily consume the seeds when they ripen beginning in early April in South Texas and by June in North Texas. An internet writer added that the green leaves, when the surface is roughened up until wet and applied to a sliver in the skin for a few minutes will either pull out the sliver or raise it enough to be pulled by tweezers. This I do not know for a fact because the leaves I tried to roughen up would not get wet enough to stick to the skin. As I add to the Whiteman's footsteps across the land I will continue to test this theory.

#

Photo captions:

1 Redseed plantain is also known as tallow weed owing to its value to grazing animals during the winter months.



2 During wetter than normal winters all species of plantain provide desirable and palatable forage for livestock and wildlife.



3 The broad flat growing leaves reminded early botanists of the sole of a foot.



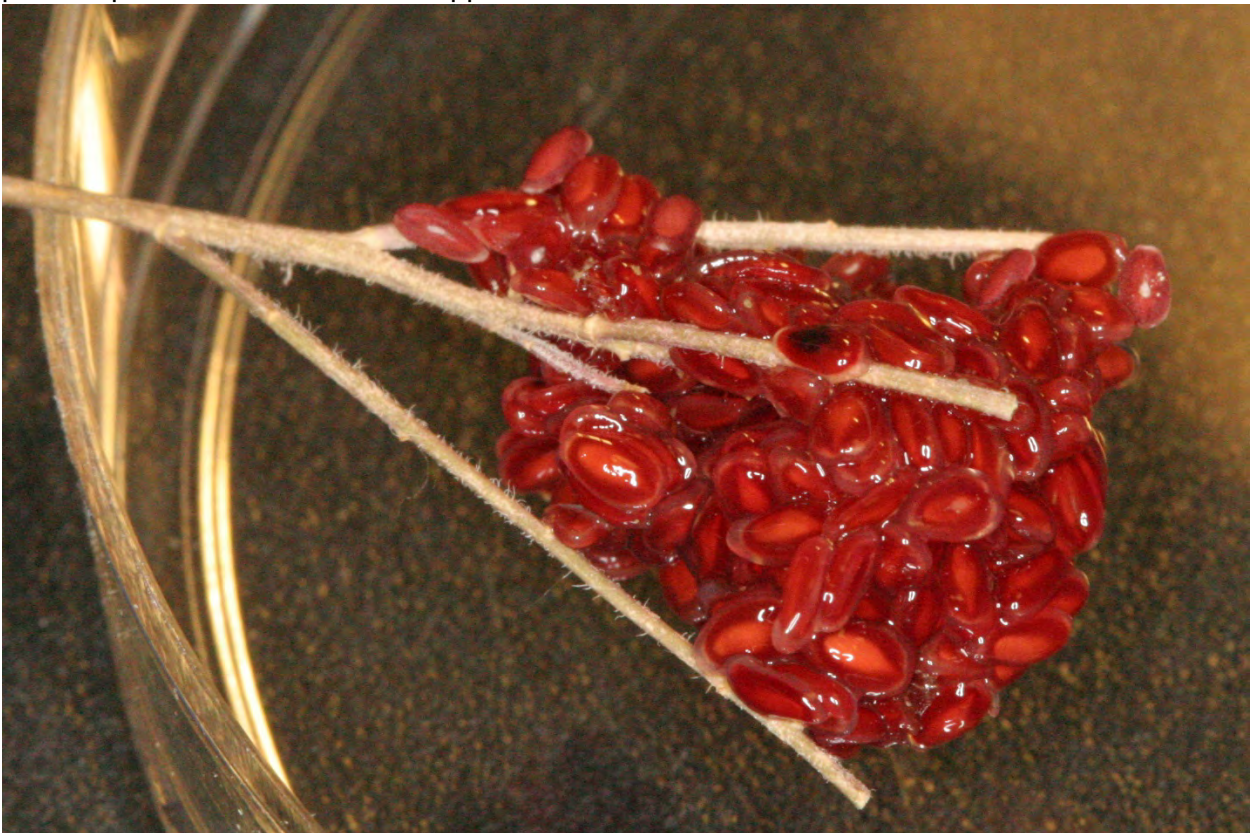
4 The matured plant has produced numerous seeds and fulfilled the role of an annual plant to reproduce itself by seed.



5 Thousands of redseed plantain seeds eventually fall to the soil surface where the seeds will be eaten by birds or transported on the feet of animals or travelers.



6 After soaking in water for 10 minutes the congealed seeds of redseed plantain could be picked up with a forked stem of Pepperweed.



7 Macro photo of the seeds with the jelly-like covering after soaking in water or wet by dew.

