

# CHEATGRASS *(Bromous tectorum L.)*

## INTRODUCTION

Cheatgrass, also known as downy brome, is native to Europe and Asia. It was first introduced to the eastern United States in 1861, likely as a contaminant in ship ballasts. By 1914, cheatgrass expanded its range to cover much of North America. Today, it is the most prolific invasive plant within North America.

In BC, cheatgrass is most prevalent in the southern portions of the province where it invades grasslands and dry forests.

Cheatgrass forms dense stands on sites that were previously disturbed. It is common in recently burned rangeland, winter crops, disturbed areas, abandoned fields, eroded areas and heavily grazed grasslands. If adequate soil moisture is available, cheatgrass can germinate in spring or fall. Plants that germinate in the fall are able to utilize spring moisture earlier than most other plants, and therefore have a competitive advantage. As a result, cheatgrass interrupts the natural re-vegetation of disturbed sites.

Cheatgrass provides an important source of spring forage on arid grazing lands. However, as plants mature, forage quality decreases and the plant becomes hazardous to consume. When dried, the long slender awns on the seed head can irritate and puncture the soft tissues inside the mouth of grazing animals and wildlife. Awns may also become lodged in the paws and ears of domestic pets, often causing infection.

## IDENTIFICATION

- Annual or winter annual grass
- Finely divided fibrous root system
- Grows from 10-75 cm tall
- Leaves are light green and hairy
- Sheaths area fused, except near the node at the bottom of each sheath. Lower sheaths are hairy; upper are sometimes smooth
- Branches are slender, drooping and hairy with up to 8 spikelets
- Spikelets, including awns, are 2-5 cm long, nodding, with 2-8 florets
- Panicles change colour from green to purple to brown as the plant matures and dries

## BIOLOGY

Cheatgrass reproduces entirely by seed. Seeds mature in mid to late June. Seeds are dispersed short distances by wind. Humans and animals move seeds larger distances when awns attach to fur and clothing.



## INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT

The most effective method of control for cheatgrass is to prevent establishment through proper land management. The healthier the natural plant community, the less susceptible it will be to cheatgrass invasion. Integrated management will require a combination of prevention and physical control. Areas free of cheatgrass should be monitored annually and all plants found should be destroyed immediately.

### PREVENTION

- Maintain grassland and dry forest habitats in a healthy condition to ensure a productive natural plant community; competitive perennial plants utilize water and nutrients that would otherwise be readily available to cheatgrass.
- Regularly patrol your property for cheatgrass plants and immediately control new infestations.
- Cooperate with adjacent landowners and encourage the control of cheatgrass and other invasive plants.
- Re-vegetate disturbed soils with a suitable seed mixture or native plants that provide dense, early colonization to prevent weed invasion.
- Clean equipment, clothing and pets of plant material and soil prior to leaving a cheatgrass infested area.

### PHYSICAL CONTROL

Small isolated infestations of cheatgrass may be hand pulled. Repeated mowing every 3 weeks in the spring and summer will manage seed production.

### BIOLOGICAL CONTROL

There are currently no biological control agents for cheatgrass approved for release in Canada, although research is underway in Washington state. Controlled grazing with livestock can help regulate cheatgrass populations.

For further information on invasive plants in BC check out the website: [www.weedsbc.ca](http://www.weedsbc.ca)  
For more information about the Regional District Okanagan-Similkameen Invasive Plant Program call 250-492-0237 or toll free at 1-877-610-3737.  
Information is also available on the RDOS website: [www.rdos.bc.ca](http://www.rdos.bc.ca)

