

Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 95-1 / January 1995

Gene Silberhorn

Wool Grass

Scirpus cyperinus (L.) Kunth

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

The common name of this plant, wool grass, is a misnomer because it is not a grass, but a member of the sedge family (Cyperaceae). Although *Scirpus cyperinus* is grasslike in general appearance, the upper part of the stem (culm) is triangular in cross section, it has enclosed leaf sheaths and the floral morphology typical of sedges. Wool grass is a coarse, tufted perennial that ranges from one to over two meters tall (up to 6.5 feet), grows in dense clusters and has rough-margined, long, narrow leaves (less than 1 cm wide) that droop near the tips. A significant diagnostic feature is the dark brown, robust-branching, fruiting clusters evident in autumn. The fruiting head is made up of many bud-like or miniature cone-like spikelets that are green in flowering stage, but become dark brown, fuzzy, and somewhat lax or drooping from late August to October.

Distribution

Wool grass is wide-ranging in geographic distribution in eastern North America and can be found in wetland habitats from Newfoundland to Minnesota and south to Louisiana and Florida. It is found throughout Virginia.

Habitat

Scirpus cyperinus is frequently found in several wetland types including tidal and nontidal freshwater marshes, sedge meadows, scrub/shrub wetlands, edges of swamps, lakes, ponds and ditches. Wool grass often invades altered wetlands, such as power line right-of-ways and ditches. Because *S. cyperinus* is not particularly shade-tolerant, it is most often found in open wetlands and is commonly associated with soft rush (*Juncus effusus*), nut sedges (*Cyperinus* spp.), netted chainfern (*Woodwardia areolata*) and on the margins of broadleaved cattail (*Typha latifolia*) stands. This sedge can tolerate periods of inundation, but usually grows in saturated soils.

Ecological Values / Benefits

Sedges belonging to the genus *Scirpus* are generally considered to be good waterfowl foods. *Scirpus* species produce small, hard-coated fruits known as achenes that are eaten by ducks, marsh birds and shorebirds. Muskrats and geese eat stems and underground parts (roots and rhizomes).

Hydrophytic Factor / Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia (1988)*, *Scirpus cyperinus* is classified as a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)**. FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%)."

Scirpus cyperinus (L.) Kunth



Wetlands Program
School of Marine Science
Virginia Institute of Marine Science
College of William and Mary
Gloucester Point, Virginia 23062
Dr. Carl Hershner, Program Director

This report was funded, in part, by the Department of
Environmental Quality's Coastal Resources Management
Program through Grant No. NA47OZ0287-01 of the
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration,
Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management,
under the Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended.



Illustration by
Kent Forrest

Printed on
recycled
paper.

